



Career Development Center's Guide to Pursue an Alternate Path – Graduate School

Deciding to pursue graduate or professional schooling after completing your undergraduate degree involves a significant commitment of your time, money, and energy, but can also be very rewarding and, in some cases, a requirement of your career path. For example, if you wish to be a doctor, or a professor, it is certain you'll need to complete medical school or pursue an advanced degree so that you may teach in a subject area. To make the best decision about graduate school, undergraduates are *strongly* encouraged to consider their level of interest, engagement in a particular area of study, and long-term career plans to ensure the selection of the best possible program.

As you consider programs, get advice from faculty in your discipline and check websites for information on schools offering degrees in your field. Visit the Career Development Center website for a list of related resources to assist you with your research, such as www.gradschools.com and www.petersons.com. Additionally, the Career Development Center maintains a database of alumni who have volunteered to provide career advice to undergraduates. Many have completed graduate school and are in a position to answer questions you may have. You should also consider the following as you make your determination: reputation of faculty; department strengths or biases related to your career goals; prestige of institution; facilities; available financial aid; success of graduate employment; and geographic location and other factors of personal importance.

Graduate School Timeline

This timeline gives you a quick overview of the graduate school application process. It is developed with the assumption that you are applying for admission for the fall semester. The timeline is very general. Be sure to check with each individual school for the deadlines that you must meet in order to be considered for admission. Please take advantage of the services, programs and resources that the Career Development Center offers to assist you with each step of the graduate school admissions process.

Junior Year and Earlier

- Think about what field of study you would like to pursue in graduate school.
- Begin to research programs by using the internet and other resources. The Career Development Center offers many web-based and print resources to assist you.
- Obtain information from the schools with graduate programs you are considering. You can obtain appropriate contact information by visiting the program's website.
- Get to know your faculty members—they are excellent sources of advice as you ponder various graduate programs. You will want to try and develop relationships with certain professors, so that you would feel comfortable requesting a letter of recommendation for your graduate school application.

Senior Year

September

- Request school catalogs and applications for admission and financial aid, or bookmark all relevant websites.
- Register for the graduate exam that is required by the particular program you are considering (GRE, GMAT, MAT, LSAT, MCAT) and prepare for the test. The Career Development Center has books and other resources to assist you.
- Begin securing letters of recommendation from faculty and others in a position to speak positively to the strengths you could bring to a graduate program of study.

October

- Begin filling out applications for admission, assistantships, and financial aid.
- Begin writing your personal statement. You can make an appointment with a tutor in the Writing Center and/or with counselor in the Career Development Center to assist you.
- Many graduate programs require you to submit a resume along with your application materials. Be sure to visit one of the Career Development Center's walk-in locations for assistance with your resume. Walk-In Centers are located on the third floor of Campion (open Monday through Friday from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM) and Mandeville 206 A (open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM).
- Take the required graduate exam.
- Get your official transcripts from the Student Services Center. Be sure to allow at least a few weeks for your transcripts to be ready during especially busy times of year.
- Be sure to double-check all deadline dates for your school(s) of choice.

November—December

- Complete all admissions application materials and forms that are available. Be sure to check any materials you send – applications, personal statements, resumes – for accuracy, spelling and grammar.
- Send or arrange to have sent on your behalf all available information that is requested by the school, such as transcripts, graduate exam scores, personal statements, letter of recommendations, and resume or curriculum vitae if appropriate.
- You don't have to wait until every item requested for an application can be sent together. Know that when an Admissions Office receives any piece of your application, a file will be created for you as well as a checklist maintained of what they have received on your behalf as well as what is still required to complete the application.

December—January

- Contact the graduate admissions offices of the schools to which you have applied to make sure they have received ALL application materials, or to ascertain what is still needed.
- Complete and mail any financial aid information.

February—June

- Evaluate offers of admission and make a decision.
- Notify all schools regardless of accepting an offer or rejecting an offer of admission.
- Follow all procedures to ensure your enrollment for the program.

Requirements for Graduate School Acceptance

Many graduate or professional schools will have similar general requirements for admission, but check with each school to ensure that you are providing all the information necessary to complete your application. Some of the most common factors that influence graduate school admissions decisions include:

- Official undergraduate transcript(s) for any higher education institutions attended (grades, major average, overall average, average in the last two years, completion of applicable courses)
- Standardized test scores
- Completion of a well-written personal statement

- Letters of recommendation
- Work experience and maturity (required for some MBA programs)
- Involvement in extracurricular activities
- State residence preference for some state schools
- Interview (required for some programs such as medical school)
- Resume (most graduate programs require a resume)
- Curriculum Vitae (Doctoral and educational-based programs)

Graduate Exams

Graduate admissions tests are often, but not always required. Check with the schools about which test is required and deadlines for submitting the information. You may have to take the Graduate Record Examination ([GRE](#)), Law School Admission Test ([LSAT](#)), Graduate Management Admission Test ([GMAT](#)), Medical College Admission Test ([MCAT](#)), or Miller Analogies Test ([MAT](#)).

GRE, GMAT, and MAT (computerized tests)

This test is comprised of: two essay questions; one qualitative (English) section; and one quantitative (Math) section. Keep in mind that both the GRE and GMAT may have you take experimental sections in either English or Math that will not be scored (however, you will not be informed as to which section does not count so answer all sections as if they count). Some other important features to consider:

- The GRE, GMAT, and MAT are computer adaptive in nature, which means that every question will get progressively more difficult when you answer the question correctly, and every question will become easier when you answer the question incorrectly.
- The first 15 questions are the most important. Answering these questions correctly will determine your score range.
- Practice courses are available for these exams from organizations such as Kaplan and Princeton Review.
- Study booklets are also accessible for every type of graduate exam. Make sure you that you find a study book that has multiple practice tests (the more the better) and a vocabulary word list (this is important to familiarize yourself with the types of words that are common on the GRE, GMAT, and MAT exams).
- Once you complete the test, you will be given the option to either “accept” or “decline” your scores. However, you will be required to make this decision before your score is calculated.
- Another option you will have before your score is calculated and revealed to you is to send your scores to five schools for free. If you wish to take advantage of this opportunity, we recommend that you send your scores to a variety of your chosen schools. For example, send your scores to one or two long-shot (or “reach”) schools, one or two middle range schools, and one or two back-up (or “safety”) schools.
- Remember your exam scores comprise only one portion of your admission application. Many committees take into account other aspects, so be sure to prepare and consider each and every part of the application carefully.
- Most importantly, start early and spend equal time preparing for each section. It is recommended that you begin your preparation for these exams four to six months in advance.
- Visit www.ets.org, www.mba.com, or www.milleranalogies.com for more information.

LSAT (paper-based test)

The LSAT is not a test of specific subjects that you have studied in college. Rather, it evaluates your ability to read, think, and reason critically. The test consists of five multiple-choice sections, including one reading comprehension section; one analytical reasoning section; two logical reasoning sections; and one variable experimental section (you will not know which section is experimental, however, so treat all sections as if they count!). Some other important features to consider:

- There is one un-scored essay section, which is sent to the law schools to which you apply as a writing sample.
- Practice courses are available for these exams from organizations such as Kaplan, Princeton Review, and Test Masters.

- Study booklets are also accessible for every type of graduate exam. Make sure that you find a study book that has multiple practice tests (the more the better).
- Set aside time in a quiet place to take some practice LSAT exams. You'll be ready for the rigors of sitting in a chair and focusing on test material for a few hours.
- Work at a steady pace and keep an eye on the clock. If you find yourself panicking about one question, then skip it and move on to the next one quickly.
- You are not penalized for wrong answers, so answer every question. If you do not know the answer to a particular question, eliminate the choices you know are incorrect and then make your best educated guess between the remaining choices.
- For the Reading Comprehension section, learn to read relatively quickly and find the main points and arguments that the author is trying to make. Do not get slowed down reading the passage too thoroughly.
- For all questions, you are not expected to bring knowledge about any particular topic to the test, and, in fact, assumptions based on prior knowledge may lead you to an incorrect answer.
- Most importantly, start early and spend equal time on each section. It is recommended that you begin your preparation for these exams four to six months in advance.
- Visit www.lsac.org for more information.

MCAT (computerized & paper-based test)

The MCAT is a multiple-choice exam that assesses problem solving, critical thinking, and writing skills. The MCAT is broken down into the following sections: verbal reasoning; physical sciences; writing sample section; and biological sciences. Only 15% of the MCAT exam questions are now designed to directly test your ability to memorize “factoids.” Therefore, be sure that you understand the material you are studying. Some other important features to consider:

- Cut your course load if possible. It is recommended that you try not to take more than 12 credit hours during the semester you plan on taking the MCAT. This should help you free up time for your studying.
- Practice courses are available for these exams from organizations such as Kaplan and Princeton Review.
- Study booklets are also accessible for every type of graduate exam. Make sure you find a study book that has multiple practice tests (the more the better).
- You are not penalized for wrong answers so answer every question. If you do not know the answer to a particular question, eliminate the choices you know are incorrect and then “guess” between the remaining choices.
- Most importantly, start early and spend equal time on each section. It is recommended that you begin your preparation for these exams three to twelve months in advance.
- Visit www.aamc.org/students/mcat for more information.

Personal Statements

Writing your personal statement marks an opportunity to connect your background and interests to your planned field of study. Make sure your personal statement is unique for each school. This is your chance to sell your skills and abilities and to communicate how you are a good “fit” for their program and institution. Some additional tips:

- Answer the entire question; do not focus on what you believe to be the most important piece of the admission question.
- Watch for word requirements and page length. Often, this is a way for the admissions committee to see how well you follow directions.
- Develop an interesting opening for your personal statement. The admissions committee reads hundreds of essays during each application period, so it is important to stand out. You want to leave a positive impression on the committee member who is reading your personal statement.
- Start early and spend time writing your personal statement. Remember, this essay is a reflection of you. If you do not put time and a quality effort into writing your personal statement, the admissions committee will know.
- Write many drafts. Do not be satisfied with your first personal statement. Have others, such as professors, parents, peers, or supervisors, proof-read your statement. The perspective of others

will help you understand how your personal statement may portray you to the committee members.

- Rewrite, proof, rewrite, proof...Use the services of the Writing Center and/or the Career Development Center. Your personal statement must be free of spelling, grammatical or other errors, so having others review it is important.
- Research faculty members who teach and conduct research at the programs to which you are applying. You may learn that a faculty member is conducting research that you are interested in. Include in your personal statement the reasons you want to study with that particular faculty member. The more you can connect yourself with the institution, the better the impression you will leave on the committee members reading your application.
- Utilize resources; there is an abundance of information that will help you write a strong personal statement. Take advantage of the free services and resources offered to you as students by the Career Development Center. The Career Development Center has books with sample personal statements that will help you brainstorm ideas.

Letters of Recommendation

It is a good idea for you to take the time to get to know your professors outside the classroom (i.e., during office hours). The better the faculty members know you both academically and personally, the better positioned they are to write strong letters of recommendations on your behalf. Some additional tips:

- Provide your professors with a copy of your personal statement and resume so that they are able to get a more complete understanding of who you are and what your goals are.
- The majority of graduate schools require the writer to attach a form. Because many other students will be asking for recommendations, assist your professors by completing the recommendation form and including a stamped, pre-addressed envelope.
- Begin the search for letters of recommendation early. If you wait until the last minute, there is a chance that your professors will not be able to write the letters on your behalf due to the high demand from other students who made requests before you did.
- Consider carefully which professors to approach to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf. Only ask those individuals in a position to speak accurately and positively about you and your abilities to succeed.
- Legally, you have the option to waive your right to read the recommendation written for you.
- Consider using an online credential service, such as Interfolio.com, which will allow you to store your letters of recommendation for future use for a small fee. This service is also beneficial because if you decide to apply to graduate school two or three years down the road, you will have stored letters of recommendation from professors written when they knew you personally.
- Inform your recommenders of your progress and what schools you have been accepted to and ultimately decide to attend. Many professors are interested in knowing what graduate schools their students end up attending.
- Do not forget to send a thank you letter to those that wrote your recommendations.

Choosing a Graduate School

Visit the institutions that you are the most interested in attending. Attend and observe classes if possible, meet with faculty and students, and ask questions of those with whom you meet. Current students at a number of schools have volunteered their time to answer questions over the phone or through e-mail. This is an opportunity to ask questions and opinions of current students about the programs and the environment of the institutions. Research the faculty at the institutions because their research and interests will generally comprise the curriculum for many courses. This research will help you to determine if the programs at the particular institutions are a good fit for you. Financial aid can be a deciding factor for choosing one school over another. Negotiation may be useful in this situation. At many institutions, it is possible to use your financial aid package from another institution as leverage to renegotiate aid. If financial reasons prohibit or limit your ability to visit schools, check for upcoming information sessions. Representatives from many schools travel throughout the country to talk with prospective students.

Scholarship and Assistantship Search

Most University aid is administered through the graduate department in the form of teaching, graduate, or research assistantships that provide tuition remission and may include a small amount of money. Contact the departments to check for listings and application forms. Graduate school is expensive and assistantships can help keep the cost manageable. Remember that assistantships will require you to work a certain number of hours a week, so make sure that you are able to handle both your academics, as well as work responsibilities. Many scholarships or assistantships require you to submit additional application materials, such as a resume, letter(s) of recommendation, and/or a personal statement, so be sure to have these items prepared early.

When embarking on a search for scholarships and fellowships from a source outside the University, know that there is not a single source that can list *all* of the scholarships for which you are eligible, but the following are good resource with which to start your research:

- SJUcareers houses a centralized scholarship database that includes scholarships, fellowships and other similar funding opportunities for which Saint Joseph's University students are eligible. To access these opportunities, simply log in to SJUcareers, click on "Jobs" from the top of your homepage, select "SJUcareers Job Search." From there, select "Scholarships" from Position Type drop-down menu and click the search button. You will then see a menu of scholarships. Click on the Scholarship name under "Job Title" to learn how to apply!
- Students are also encouraged to utilize the Saint Joseph's University Fellowships Office, which offers guidance and advice to fellowship applicants already enrolled in University. The Fellowships Office works closely with fellowship / scholarship applicants in every step of the application process, from discerning which fellowships / scholarships best suit their needs to discussing the steps that need to be taken along the way. For more information, please visit the Fellowships Office website: <http://www.sju.edu/academics/resources/fellowships/>
- Scholarship books are another great resource to help broaden your search.
- Use free online services such as www.fastweb.com, www.scholarshipexperts.com, and www.scholarships.com.
- Explore federal and other financial aid programs using paper publications and on-line resources like www.finaid.org.
- Contact the schools' financial aid offices; often times they will have listings for both scholarships and assistantships that are available.

It is important to exercise caution and discretion when considering the use of a scholarship service. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) lists six key signs that may serve as a clue that a scholarship service is a scam:

- The agency "guarantees" the scholarship or "your money back."
- The scholarship service will "do all the work."
- The scholarship service costs money.
- The scholarship service advertises that "you can't get this information anywhere else."
- You receive information that "you are a finalist" in a competition that you never entered.
- The scholarship service asks for your credit card or checking account number in advance.