PREPARING FOR GRAD SCHOOL

The process for preparing for grad school, the application process, requirements, and timelines can all vary greatly depending on the type of grad program, and even from school to school. The information in this handout provides only a very general guide to what you might expect, and the steps to take to plan and prepare. For individualized assistance, see a Career Counselor or your faculty advisor.

Step 1: Should I go to grad school?
Grad school is not a place to go to hide out from the job market. Make sure that your reasons for pursuing a graduate degree are clear, and that they are consistent with your career goals. Here are some important points to consider:

- Graduate degrees are much more focused than undergraduate degrees, and require you to have an in-depth understanding of your interests and goals prior to even applying.
- Consider first your long-term goals. You most likely won’t be a student forever. Before knowing if grad school is the right move, you must have assessed your career goals.
- Thoroughly research the role of a graduate degree in your desired line of work, as well as its demand in the area you plan to live in. Is it a requirement? Is it desired? Is it uncommon? Grad degrees play a different role in every industry and occupation; it is not an automatic guarantee of higher pay or more job opportunities.

Should I go now or later?
Students often wonder if it’s best to go straight through to grad school, or to take some time off and work first. There is no right answer, and it largely depends on your intended career field. Here are some things to consider:

- How heavily do your grad programs weigh related work experience in evaluating applicants? Some programs desire or even require applicants to have a certain amount of related experience, while others do not.
- How highly do employers in your field value experience, and how much experience do they expect someone with a graduate degree to have? In your field, is a graduate degree-level position considered entry level, or advanced? If you want to qualify for jobs and pay that match your degree, make sure you also have the desired experience.
- Is a grad degree required to do the job you want? In fields where it is, such as medicine or law, students are more likely to go right away, and related experience is typically less important. In fields where it is not, such as business, students tend to go later, and experience is more important.

Step 2: The Preparation Process
Remember, this will all depend on the programs you’re applying to, but these steps will give you an idea of what to expect.

1. Know when to start. Really, preparing for grad school takes years. The earlier you know you might consider grad school, the better, because all the things you do during college (i.e. grades, activities, work experience, etc.) will impact your chances. Once you know you might want to go, find out what types of qualifications your programs look for, and start building those up early.

2. Identify schools who offer your program. The website gradschools.com offers a general search feature and can be a good starting point; however, the BEST way to identify schools is to find out what organization accredits your programs, and obtain a list of accredited programs from them (usually available online). If your program does not have a national accrediting organization, there may be other websites that provide lists of schools, which are generally easy to find in a Google search. Ask faculty in your field for recommendations on how to find programs.

3. Research individual programs. Every program at every school is different! Because of the nature of graduate education, finding the right fit for you is critical. Most programs have a lot of information on their website, but don’t stop there. Talk to faculty. Talk to current students. Visit the campus and tour the facilities.

4. Select schools to apply to. Since admission can be very competitive, you want to select at least several schools to apply to. Here are some things to think about, but make your own list and use it to evaluate programs.
   - How is the program structured? Is it a cohort model? Are you required to go full time or can you set your own pace? What modes of instruction are offered?
   - How many students are in the program? How big will your classes be? How much one-on-one time will you get with faculty?
   - What kind of financial aid is available? Many schools offer various forms of graduate assistantships, fellowships, and tuition waivers, but what’s available and how the aid is structured varies greatly from school to school.
   - Are there faculty whose interests align with yours? Since you work closely with faculty in grad school, researching individual faculty members can be an important part of researching a program. In a research-oriented grad program it’s especially important to research faculty because you’ll need to indicate in your application who you’re interested in working with.
5. **Create a preparation plan.** In your research, determine what qualifications the programs you plan to apply to are looking for, assess what you currently have, and create a plan to fill in the holes. Keep in mind you'll need to have obtained all the necessary qualifications by about 6-9 months prior to when you hope to start your grad program.

6. **Stay on top of the application timeline.** You should start getting ready to apply AT LEAST A YEAR before the date you hope to start your program. Below you will find a suggested timeline.

### Step 3: The Application Process

Applying to grad school can be a very long process with a lot of steps. Determine your course of action based on the requirements and deadlines of the schools you will apply to, but here is a general idea of what to expect:

#### Parts of the Application

**What will schools use to determine who they admit?**

- **GPA** (nearly always)
- **Standardized test scores** (nearly always). The most common across grad programs is the GRE (ets.org), but certain types of programs have their own tests, such as law (LSAT), business (GMAT), and medicine (MCAT).
- **Personal statement** (nearly always). This is an essay that addresses things like your interests within your field of study, your educational and career goals, or your background as it relates to your profession of study. Some programs will provide specific guidelines regarding content and length. The Career Center and your faculty advisor can help with these.
- **Letters of recommendation** (nearly always). 3 is most common. Know who your schools want your letters to come from and make a plan to obtain strong letters. Some programs want most or all to come from faculty, and just taking a class from someone is not enough to get a good letter. The strongest letters come from faculty you have worked with, such as if you were a TA or research assistant for them.
- **Resume or Curriculum Vita (CV)** (sometimes). Professional programs are more likely to ask for a resume, which focuses on experience and activities, while academic or research-oriented programs are more likely to ask for a CV, which focuses on academic achievements (such as research, publications, conferences, etc.). See the Career Center and your faculty advisor for assistance with these.
- **Interview** (sometimes). Some schools require an interview as part of the admissions process. These can be extensive and different from a job interview, so see the Career Center for assistance.
- **Other qualifications pertaining to your field of study:** Could include relevant work experience, research experience, community service, job shadowing or observation hours, extracurricular activities, involvement in relevant professional activities and organizations, etc.

#### Application Timeline

Here is a suggested general timeline to follow when applying, using the example of student planning to go straight from undergrad to grad school, and start in the fall semester:

- Beginning of the summer before your senior year (15 months out): **Start preparing for the GRE or other test.** You will want to have ample time and attention to devote to this since most students' scores strongly correlate with how much time they spent preparing. Test prep materials and classes are available.
- By the start of your senior year (12 months out): **Take the GRE or other test.** You may think you can wait, but you want to leave yourself extra time in case you need to take it multiple times to get the score you need.
- Beginning of the fall semester (12 months out): **Request your letters of recommendation.** Faculty receive a lot of requests and are very busy, and getting your letters in can often take longer than you might think.
- During fall semester (9-12 months out): **Write your personal statements** if not done earlier, and **prepare any other application materials.**
- December-March (6-9 months out): **Send out applications,** depending on individual deadlines. Most deadlines are in January and February, but some may be as early as December. Some programs, particularly those who do rolling admissions, may have later deadlines.
- March-April (5-6 months out): If interviews are part of the admissions process, they are likely to occur during this general time period.
- May-June (3-4 months out): Candidates will typically be notified of admission status.

For more information, [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com) is a good resource that covers the preparation process and all the parts involved in more detail.

**The Career Center can help!**

We can assist you in the process of deciding whether to attend grad school, help you construct your grad school resume or CV, advise you on your personal statement, and coach you in grad school interviewing.

Call to set up an appointment. • 426-1747 • http://career.boisestate.edu