Is graduate school the right move for you?

This is a general guide, compiled from multiple resources to help UNH alumni navigate the decision to attend graduate school as well as a guide for the application process.

Step 1. Why pursue graduate education?

- Do you have a strong interest in the subject matter?
- Are you prepared to continue your education?
- Will it improve your career outlook and/or help you reach your career goals?
- Are you applying simply to avoid the job market?
Graduate school is a large commitment of both time and money. Be sure you are applying for the right reasons! You want to make sure that the program you are applying to is the program that will allow you to fulfill your long-term goals. Talk to people in the field you are interested in to find out their educational background and what they recommend for graduate study.

Ask yourself:

- What are my interests?
- What will I specialize in?
- Can I stay motivated for the next two to seven years (time varies depending on program length)?
- If you are planning on full-time graduate work, are you prepared to live on savings, student loans and/or stipends?
- Can I succeed in graduate school?

Applying to graduate programs can be rather costly - application fees, postal fees, and test fees can be costly. Be sure you save enough money to apply to a variety of schools ranging from "reach" to "safety."

**Step Two: Research and Discuss Options**

In some cases, similar types of programs vary in coursework and degree conferred. For example, there may be slight differences between public policy programs and public administration programs. Likewise, a degree in counseling may not necessarily be found in the psychology department - it may fall within the realm of education. Be sure you investigate fully the type of program as well as the specific program itself. Resources to help guide your research:

- Graduate program rankings (research individual program rankings within their field as they do not necessarily correspond with general university rankings)
- Find someone in your field to talk to utilizing the Alumni Career Network
- [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)
- [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)
- Former professors
- Professional Associations (For example, the American Psychological Association's Web site has a student section with information for those interested in graduate school)
- Grad school reference books at your local bookstore or library
- Program accreditations for the field that may affect job outlook post-graduation
- Specialty guides in your field and/or affiliated professional associations
- Academic journals - Be familiar with research in your field of interest
- University Web sites (look for faculty bios and current graduate student profiles)
Quintessential Careers suggests examining the following in your choice:

- Accreditation
- Admissions Standards
- Career Assistance
- Cost/Financial Aid
- Culture
- Degrees Offered
- Size
- Faculty
- Location
- State Regulations/Residency Requirements
- Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities
- Facilities
- Reputation/Ranking
- Research/Academic Focus

Remember: Be sure you are applying to the program that fits your long-term goals. Each program may have a certain "slant" in the field. Be aware of a university's niche and be sure that your philosophy aligns with theirs.

Step Three: Check Admissions Requirements

Each school may have different application processes and deadlines. Be sure you look into each program individually for requirements such as:

- Undergraduate/previous graduate coursework prerequisites
- Graduate test (GMAT, LSAT, GRE, DAT, etc.)
- Number of references
- Deadlines
- Personal statement
- Writing samples

Generally, it is better to apply early. This ensures you have time to handle any missing documents from your file. Some graduate programs will review applications as they are received, in which case applying early may increase your chances of admission.

Deadlines and application instructions are non-negotiable. Applications received after the date they are due will most likely be disregarded. Be sure your personal statement and/or writing samples fit the requirements (e.g., page number, font size, topic) or they may not be considered.

Financial Aid Information

Talk to someone in each program/institution individually about financial aid, scholarship, fellowship, teaching assistantship and graduate assistantship information in addition to the resources below. Schools
may have specific programs that you may apply to in addition to outside grants and scholarships. Applying to programs early offers you a better chance of obtaining one of these packages.

(See resource links at the bottom)

**Step Four: Compile and Submit Applications**

- Apply early, or at the very least, on time. Applications received after the deadline will not be reviewed.
- Take the required graduate admission test(s) with enough time for scores to arrive before the deadline.
- Have your essay proofread and be sure it meets the stated requirements
- Double-check all materials and, if submitting a paper application, photocopy before mailing
- If possible, send all materials together. You may want to consider sending your application via certified mail
- Confirm that your application has arrived and there are no missing documents
- Inquire about the interviewing process if applicable
- Typically, candidates apply to five to 15 programs divided between "safe," "maybe," and "reach" programs.

**Graduate Admission Tests**

Prepare for graduate admissions tests as if you are only going to be taking it one time. Do not go into a test to "wing it" or "see what it's like." If you take the exam more than once, each school treats those scores differently; some take the average, some take the lowest or the highest. Overall, to perpetually retake a graduate school exam does not come across strongly in your application.

**Common Admissions Tests**

**Law - [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)**

- The LSAC (Law School Admissions Council) Web site has information about LSAT and LSDAS (Law School Data Assembly Service), which helps in centralizing law school applications. Most law schools require that applications are received through the LSDAS service.
- LSAT is a paper-based exam typically given in June, October, December or February. Keep in mind when registering for the LSAT that schools need to receive your scores by their deadline. LSAT preparation courses are available but not required.

**Business - [www.gmac.com](http://www.gmac.com)**

- The GMAT is taken as a part of admissions requirements for MBA programs.

**General - [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)**
• The GRE is a computer-based test, so you will need to schedule an appointment to take the exam at a testing center, a listing of which may be found online. Be sure to visit the GRE Web site to learn more about the test and download a free practice test. Books are available at your local bookstore to aid your preparation for the GRE and courses are available through Kaplan, Princeton Review or other related organizations.

• GRE subject tests may also be required in some cases. Subject test areas are biochemistry, cell and molecular biology, biology, chemistry, computer science, English literature, mathematics, physics, and psychology.

Dental - www.ada.org

• The DAT is a computer based test required for applying to dental programs. You will need to call a testing center to schedule an exam.

Medical - www.aamc.org

• The MCAT tests verbal reasoning, physical sciences, writing and biological sciences. Typically, candidates undergo intense preparation for the MCAT through a course or other mechanism.

Personal Statements

• Some programs may ask for a "personal statement," "statement of purpose," or more specific essay questions.
• Keep to prescribed length and subject matter. Make sure it is organized and clear. Be honest.
• Utilize industry-specific language.
• Avoid clichés.
• Incorporate research from academic journals you have perused (if appropriate) or your examination of the program professor's research interests. This is a good way to tie in any preemptive dialogue you have had with professors in the program.
• Understand the importance of a unique opening paragraph. The admissions committee could be reading hundreds of essays. How can you draw the reader in while still remaining professional and on point?
• Tailor your essay to the particular program to which you are applying. Why are you interested in the program? What makes it unique? What can you offer to the program?
• Demonstrate your interest and passion for the subject matter by providing examples. How has your background prepared you for a graduate program in this area? What do you hope to accomplish in the program and after graduation?
• You will most likely need to write several drafts.
• Have it proofread, if possible, by someone in your area of interest.
Step Six: Choose a Program

- Is the university's faculty diverse regarding research in the discipline?
- Does the program emphasize theory or practice?
- Does the program include an internship and/or practicum? If so, does the school help you obtain an internship/practicum?
- Are there fields to specialize in within the program/department?
- How long is the program and how many credits are required?
- Is there a final comprehensive exam or thesis?
- What is the reputation of the school/program? Is it accredited?
- What financial aid opportunities are available (teaching assistantships, resident assistantships, scholarships, grants, etc.)? This will vary from school to school.
- What do graduates typically do after completing the program?
- Are you comfortable with the location and size of the school?

Sources:

- University of Texas at Arlington, Honors College: Thinking of Going to Graduate School?
- Quintessential Careers

Recommended Resources*

- Graduate Admissions Essays - Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice by Don Asher
- www.gradschools.com
- Peterson's Guides
- Kaplan testing resources
- Princeton Review testing resources
- Financial Aid
- FastWeb.com, searchable database of scholarship information
- FinAid: Financial Aid for Graduate School, information on financial aid such as loans, scholarships, and fellowships
- US Department of Education: Federal Student Aid, federal loan information
- FAFSA application for government education loans
- Graduate Guide, graduate financial aid information
- *See also the online resource section of our Web site.