

# Graduate School Application Process:

An Overview for Master's and Doctoral Programs



## Career Services

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**Explore. Experience. Engage.**

## Am I Ready?

The decision to attend graduate school, and how soon after the completion of your bachelor's degree, will be dictated by your individual situation. Have you had an enriching undergraduate experience to feel confident about choosing your field of interest for grad school? Have these experiences also resulted in feeling not only competitive in the admissions process but also competent about pursuing graduate study? Do you have the motivation and commitment to engage in a course of study that will involve at least two years at the master's level to an average of 5-6 years (variable) at the doctoral level? If you are hesitant to respond, you may find that you would benefit from working first to assess your career goals as well as to develop experience. Simultaneously, you may consider some additional coursework to bridge your interests, especially if you are choosing a course of study different from your bachelor's degree, or if you are concerned about the strength of your undergraduate record. However, if the answer to these questions is "yes," then consider applying to graduate programs that immediately follow your bachelor's degree. Whichever best describes your situation, the following information provides a guide to the graduate school application process.

## How To Get Started

Ideally, your focus on the graduate school application process should start at *least* one full year in advance of when you would expect to see yourself beginning the graduate program.

To begin, you must **identify your interest**. Although you may know you want to continue your education, you may not be sure of exactly what area you want to pursue. Career Services staff may be able to help you assess your interests, values and other goals to identify your desired program of study. To take personality, interest, values and/or skills inventories and meet with a Career Services staff member, call (512) 863-1346 to schedule an appointment.

Next, you need to **identify programs** where you would like to apply. Two helpful resources are the websites [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com) or [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com). These websites have searchable databases by academic field and location. University websites offer details on program information, application materials and information about financial aid and housing.

The **GRE Search Service** is a free, web-based service that matches prospective graduate students with participating

graduate schools as well as with fellowship sponsors and non-profit organizations that promote graduate education.

If you match the recruitment profile of a participating institution/organization, you will be sent information about graduate programs, admission requirements, financial aid opportunities, fellowships, and other education opportunities. You will automatically be included in the Search Service when you register for a GRE Test. Anyone considering graduate study may also register for the FREE GRE Search Service without registering for the GRE. See [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) for more details.

Every fall, Career Services offers *Getting Into Graduate School*, a free event for all students interested in getting advice from SU faculty, entrance exam specialists and/or graduate admission counselors. Other support services may include free practice entrance exams, test prep workshops and practice interviews, which can be tailored to graduate school admission. For details on these events, you can contact Career Services at (512) 863-1346, or see [www.southwestern.edu/careers](http://www.southwestern.edu/careers).

It's a good idea to consult with your advisor and/or professors in your area of interest. They may be able to provide suggestions about schools to consider as well as some important information about the reputation of the school or the quality of the faculty teaching there. Graduate students who are currently enrolled in programs are also a valuable source of information. Since they have recently gone through the process, they may be able to share their experiences with you.

## What Graduate Schools Are Looking For

Typically, graduate schools will evaluate you in five different areas: grade point average, Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, letters of recommendation, statement of purpose and experience. Each institution's departmental faculty decide upon admission requirements for its prospective students. Therefore, you may find other factors taken into consideration as well (e.g. personal interviews or writing samples).

### GPA

The GPA is a standard estimate of your aptitude to be academically successful in graduate school. GPAs are calculated in a number of ways: cumulative, by major or using the most recent units earned. You will need to check with individual institutions to see how they handle GPA calculation.

### GRE

The Graduate Record Exam is required by most universities in the United States. It is used not only for purposes of

admission but also sometimes used (in conjunction with other criteria) to award fellowships, teaching assistantships and research assistantships. Since August 2011, the GRE contains major revisions from the former test. The general exam tests three areas. **Verbal reasoning** has sections of text-completion, sentence equivalents and reading comprehension. There are no longer analogies or antonyms on the revised test. **Quantitative reasoning** involves quantitative comparison and problem solving covering arithmetic, algebra and geometry. There are both multiple choice questions and numeric entry questions. An on-screen calculator has been added to the revised test. The **analytical writing** section ('present your perspective on an issue' writing task and 'analyze an argument' writing task) has been updated to require more focused responses. For each essay task, you will be given one topic rather than a choice of topics.

The GRE is administered via computer at testing facilities across the country and year-round at computer-based test centers. For those taking the revised test between August and November 2011, scores will not be available until November. To compensate for this delay, a discount is available for taking the GRE during this time. Starting in December, score reports will be mailed to recipient institutions 10-15 days after you complete the test (provided you complete the writing tasks on the computer).

For detailed information about test fees, test center locations, preparation materials, the search service, etc. see the comprehensive GRE website at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org). Additional preparation help, including materials, free workshops and fee-based prep classes, is offered by vendors such as Kaplan and Princeton Review.

### Letters of Recommendation

Getting these letters, which are very important in the application process, seems to cause the most stress for students. Typically, you will need to contact three writers. Depending upon the requirements of your program they may be from faculty, internship supervisors, employers or others who can confidently discuss your potential for graduate-level work. Be sure to give your references plenty of time to write the letters. For help figuring out how to approach potential references, contact Career Services.

### Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose (sometimes referred to as the "essay" or "personal statement") is your opportunity to state who you are, where you are coming from and where you are going professionally. The statement is typically 2-3 pages (typed, double-spaced) and should be an essay of the highest quality. *Graduate Admission Essays* by Donald Asher is available in the Career Services Resource Center to assist you in getting started in writing your personal statement. Additionally, critiques of your essay may be arranged by appointment with a Career Services staff member. Your advisor or a faculty member may also be able to assist you.

### Experience

Admissions committees want to know how much and what types of experience you have had in your field. The place to discuss your experience is in the statement of purpose. You might include internships, research experiences,

capstones, applicable employment, laboratory assignments, etc. Such opportunities demonstrate that you have the experience and commitment necessary as you pursue your professional goals.

## Financial Aid

### Institutional

Typically, these awards consist of research and teaching assistantships, tuition fee waivers and fellowships. Awards are usually based upon merit rather than financial need and are instrumental in recruiting candidates to their programs. The application process is usually included as part of the admissions application. **The deadline to apply for these awards, however, is often much earlier than program deadlines (usually early January).**

### Federal and State

Applying for this assistance is a separate process in addition to applying for admission. At some schools, applying for Federal aid and institutional support are combined. In all instances, you will be required to complete a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form. You will only need to complete one FAFSA as there is a section you can use to have the data sent to multiple institutions.

Some schools may require a supplemental application. This usually occurs when schools combine the awarding of Federal and institutional aid. This may not be a free service, so check with each school to make sure it is required. For comprehensive information online about financing graduate school, including downloading the FAFSA, see [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org).

### Private Sector

This body encompasses local, national and international organizations, foundations and corporations. Funds are available to support graduate education in a number of ways. Fellowships primarily provide for living expenses and, in some instances, payment of tuition and fees. Recipients benefit from these funds as they are usually free to utilize them at the college of their choice. Career Services offers several publications, including the *Worldwide Graduate Scholarship Directory*, in the Resource Center to help you locate funding opportunities. Application deadlines vary, so start your investigation early.

## Timeline for Fall Applications

The "ideal" timeline for applying to graduate school upon graduation from SU begins the spring of your junior year.

### Spring

Begin the exploration process via Career Services, the Internet and by talking to faculty at SU and on other campuses. Pave the way for asking for letters of recommendation.

### Summer

Prepare seriously for entrance exams. Start a draft of your statement of purpose.

### Fall

Take entrance exams. Complete your statement of purpose. Finish gathering letters of recommendation. By the end of the fall semester, turn in all applications to meet priority deadlines for funding and admission.