

Is Graduate School for You?

Graduate School is about specialization, not exploration; it is a wonderful opportunity to immerse yourself in a specific content area. In some cases a graduate degree may be required to practice your field and in some disciplines the graduate school admissions staff may prefer candidates who have practical experience that will enhance the graduate level study. Regardless, before you jump into the application process it is wise to take a moment to consider the following questions.

Questions to ask yourself:

Why are you thinking about going to Graduate School?

Reasons to go

- You have clearly identified a target area of great interest
- Your field requires you to have an advanced degree to progress in your specific area
- You are ready to put real world experience and theoretical knowledge together

Reasons NOT to go

- Nervous about the job search
- Putting off entering the working world
- You are comfortable at SSC and don't really want to leave
- If I don't go now I know I'll never go
- Pressure from significant others

What to study?

In some cases your graduate school path may be very clear- you are an accounting student who wishes to work in public accounting, which requires additional credits beyond an undergraduate degree to sit for the CPA exam. In other cases, you may have discovered a passion while in college or through your work experience that requires further study. Often, individuals have a desire for more knowledge but are unclear as to how to fine-tune their direction. A review of past classes, positions, volunteer experiences, as well as general interests may help identify themes of which you were previously unaware. The staff in Career Services is available to help with this process of self-assessment. Make an appointment with a counselor who through conversation, inventories and guided exploration will help you identify possible career paths and graduate school programs, which will support your career goals.

Where to apply?

Evaluating Programs

- Admissions Requirements
 - Research requirements; GPA, work experience, prior course work, test scores, essay ...?
- Curriculum
 - Review the course offerings do they match your professional goals?
 - Is a thesis or final comprehensive examination required?
 - Does the program require a practicum or experiential experience?
- Reputation/Quality
 - Is the program accredited?
 - How is the program perceived by industry professional associations and prospective employers?

- Outcomes
 - How many students who start the program complete it?
 - What % of graduates are employed in a related field and what services are provided to assist students in the transition from school to professional employment?
- Faculty
 - What is the student/ teacher ratio?
 - How many faculty teach in the graduate program?
 - Investigate faculty background (degrees, alma mater, specialties)
 - Does the department have a shared philosophy?
 - What is the institutions expectation for faculty in regard teaching vs. research?
 - Are faculty well known in their field and what have they published recently?

When should I start my preparation for graduate school?

- Junior Year
 - Start researching programs and colleges (internet, graduate guides)
 - Identify target programs, request catalogs from individual programs
- Summer Between
 - Identify what standardized test is required
 - Study for graduate school test (class, book, CD Rom program)
 - Take required standardized tests
- Senior Year
 - *September/October*
 - Begin work on a draft of your statement of purpose
 - Research financial options
 - Request recommendations, references
 - *November/December*
 - Request Official transcripts
 - Finalize statement of purpose, customizing for each application
 - Mail completed application early
 - *January/March*
 - Contact schools about setting up a time to visit & interview
 - Meet and speak with current students and/or alumni
 - Fill out financial aid forms
 - *April*
 - Compare acceptances, follow-up on rejections to see if you can gain insight into why and to gain insight into how you might improve your chances in the future.

What is Special Student status?

You missed the deadline, were not accepted into your dream program, now what? Many graduate programs will allow students to take up to 3 courses prior to formal acceptance. Be sure to read the college catalog or speak with a graduate school admissions staff member to clearly understand the institutions policy. Special student status can be a great way to try out graduate level study, get the inside scoop on a college/ university and/or program.

How will you pay for graduate school?

Many people interested in attending graduate school are turned off by the thought of the expense. Before you close the door on graduate school explore all your options. Most graduate students finance their education with a combination of grants, fellowships, assistantships and loans. Ask each institution about possible financial assistance, and use the Internet and print resources to explore external sources of funding. Don't forget, many employers have tuition reimbursement plans and many colleges/universities offer liberal educational benefits to their staff.

What is a Personal Statement & what should I include?

Typically a Personal Statement is your first opportunity to present yourself in a personal fashion to the graduate admissions counselors. To do so effectively, it is important that before you jump into writing your essay, you take time to review your history (school, work, personal ...) and consider who you are writing for and why. The better you know yourself and your audience the easier it will be to present yourself both on paper and in person.

In some applications the college or program will ask you to respond to specific questions and in other cases you are given a lot of latitude in what you choose to write about. It is crucial to your success that you clearly understand what the college is specifically looking for and respond appropriately. It can be tempting to use the same writing sample for each application however that is the quickest way to have your application dismissed.

In a general personal statement the first section typically focuses on your career goals and how this particular graduate program is well suited to help you achieve your goals. The second section emphasizes in greater detail your experiences and the history of your interest in this field. Consider including a statement of what you believe you can contribute to the program as well as what you hope to gain. Personal attributes, qualities and strengths certainly can be included in this section. In the last section, either quickly review the highlights mentioned above or introduce a significant item of interest. Remember the goal is to be remembered so be specific, give examples that help distinguish you from other applicants.

Keep in mind; writing an effective personal statement is a process that involves significant effort and multiple drafts. As with any major writing effort it is helpful to have periodic feedback on both content and style.

Who should I ask for a reference?

Graduate school will usually require 3 letters of references as part of the application packet. Most people are happy to write a letter of recommendation when asked if they are given adequate time and have been prepared appropriately. It is helpful to have a conversation with the individuals who will be writing your letter to review your goals and experiences, skills and attributes that you think would be helpful to include in the reference. Additionally, you may want to give the writer a copy of your resume and personal statement. It is best to avoid family members and focus on faculty and employers who know you well. Remember that a graduate school will not act on your application until it is complete. It is a good idea to follow up with the college/university to see if anything is still pending from your file.

* For more information on graduate school, visit the Career Services Office and/or check out our website: www.salemst.edu/careersvs for additional resources.