

Applying to Graduate School



Office of Career Development

Vassar College

Once you've made the decision to attend graduate or professional school, you need to figure out which institutions and programs are best suited to your needs. It's also important to understand how the application process works. This handout is designed for those who have already made a commitment to graduate study in a particular field; if you're not at that point yet, consider reading the Career Brief "Thinking About Graduate School?"

In choosing where to apply and ultimately which graduate program to enter, there are many factors to consider. You'll need to think about which ones matter most to you, and tailor your investigation accordingly.

Factors to Consider:

Reputation—Is the program/institution nationally recognized? Regionally? Locally? Ask members of the profession you are considering and check for ranking information in the Career Library (although rankings should not be relied on exclusively).

Faculty research specialties—Are faculty members of the institution conducting research in areas of interest to you? (Look on department websites, or ask them directly; read their publications in professional journals.)

Faculty prominence—Are professors in the program

recognized leaders in their field? Are they widely published? (Ask Vassar faculty; scan appropriate journals; request faculty biographies or publication lists.)

Method of study—Does the program emphasize theory? Practice? Research? A combination? (Read and compare program literature; talk with faculty and current students or graduates.)

Flexibility—How much of the program can be tailored to fit your interests? What courses are offered outside the department which would enhance your core curriculum? (Ask faculty members; peruse university catalog.)

Geographic location—Do you want to live in this area for the time it will take to complete your degree? (Talk to others who have lived there—Vassar alumnae/i are a good resource.)

Financial assistance—How expensive is the school? What types of financial aid are available and how much could you expect to receive? (Ask faculty members, the school's financial aid office or the graduate admissions office about the likelihood of receiving different types of aid; apply for non-university grants, fellowships and loans.)

Help with post-graduate employment—Where do graduates of the program typically find work?

How much assistance is offered to job seekers? (Talk to graduates of the program; gather information from the institution's career office.)

Academic support—How extensive is the library collection, how up-to-date is the computer or lab equipment? (Visit the facilities; talk to faculty members.)

Campus/community involvement—Are there opportunities for involvement and/or leadership outside the program? (Request information about the community at large; talk to others in the program.)

There are several resources in the Career Development Office and on our website which can help you to research graduate programs.

- The Peterson's Guides (in the library and online) are an excellent comprehensive resource; we also have books on specific graduate and professional schools disciplines such as urban planning, psychology, and journalism.
- Search the V-NET database for Vassar alums who have gone to the schools that interest you. Everyone in the database is willing to talk with students.
- Most graduate school catalogs can be found on the college or university's web site.

Deferring admission

Many students ask about the possibility of deferring graduate school admission. Some institutions or departments have a policy not to defer admission at all, while others grant deferrals on a case-by-case basis.

If you're not ready to commit to graduate school for next year, think about collecting recommendation letters and application materials now, but actually applying when you're more focused.

The Application Package

Most graduate and professional schools require the following items from applicants: application form, essay or personal statement, resume or CV, transcripts, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation. Some schools require interviews as well. Depending upon the type of program, you may also be asked to submit work samples or a portfolio, or to perform an audition.

- **Application form**—Most applications are now online. Accuracy, neatness, and thoroughness are important. If you are submitting a paper form, make copies of the form to use for your first drafts and type the final version if not electronic.
- **Essay or personal statement**—Here's your chance to express why you want to go to graduate school, and why you're specifically interested in a particular department or program. Discuss how your background and qualifications have prepared you for graduate work, and show evidence of your motivation to succeed. Also relate immediate objectives and long-term goals-- what academic areas you wish

to focus on and what you hope to do with your advanced degree. The personal essay should represent your best writing efforts and be proofread carefully. Contact a counselor at the CDO and the Learning and Teaching Center for critiques and/or further assistance.

- **Resume or CV**

Come by the CDO or download a resume guide from our website for assistance. Also drop in the CDO for a critique.

- **Transcripts**—Request official copies of your transcript from the registrar's office of every college you have attended, even if you were not awarded a degree. If sending a transcript before completing your degree, you will be asked to provide a final transcript at the end of your last semester.

- **Standardized tests**—

Commonly required tests are the GRE (for most academic disciplines), LSAT (law), GMAT (business), MAT (sometimes used for education and psychology), and MCAT (medicine). Information about the MCAT can be found in the Office of Fellowships and Pre-Health Advising Office (M-N162). Other questions can be directed the Career Development Office.

The GRE general test, MCAT, MAT and GMAT are given in a self-scheduled, computer based format at off-campus locations. The LSAT and the GRE subject tests are paper based, and are typically held on-campus. Scores are available anytime from immediately to 2 months depending on the test. Exam scores are usually considered valid for 3 to 5 years.

- **Letters of recommendation**-- Most graduate schools request three or four letters from faculty members to support your application. If you're applying to a professional program or have been out of school for a while, you may also include letters from employers.

Solicit letters from people who are familiar with your work. Letters which are detailed and specific are usually more valuable to your candidacy. Since graduate schools typically ask for confidential recommendations, it is especially important to have candid and open relationships with the people who write your letters.

The Office of Career Development maintains a reference letter mailing service for students and alumnae/i. Check with our receptionist about starting a file.

Your letters of recommendation for the health professions, however, should go to the Office of Fellowships and Pre-Professional Advising.

Career Brief: Graduate and Professional School Information

Here is a timeline that may be helpful when planning your application to graduate or school:

Junior Year (or the year before you plan to apply)

- Research programs and institutions. Talk to faculty, alumnae/i, and others who have done graduate work in your field of interest.
- Collect literature and visit with school representatives at the Graduate and Professional School Information Day in the fall.
- If you're interested in applying to medical or other health-related programs, consult with the Office of Fellowships and Pre-Health Advising office in M-N162.

Rising Seniors (or the summer before the year you plan to apply)

- Obtain applications and catalogs for selected schools, or review literature at school and department websites.
- Set up a timeline of crucial dates and tasks.
- Review for and take standardized tests (Juniors should take the MCAT in April or August before Senior year).
- Visit schools.
- Write rough drafts of essays.
- Register with application services for law school (LSDAS) and medical school (AMCAS).

First Semester Senior Year

- Ask faculty for letters of recommendation and fill out a registration form in the Career Development Office.
- Take standardized tests if you have not yet done so (Seniors usually take the LSAT in June or October).

- Apply for Vassar and other fellowships.
- Attend the Graduate and Professional School Information Day in the fall.
- Rewrite essays and complete applications.
- Contact the registrar's office to have transcripts sent.
- Set up interviews (if applicable).

Second Semester Senior Year

- Check with schools to make sure application file is complete; send fall transcripts.
- Visit programs that accept you.
- Send deposit and registration material.