



Thinking About and Applying to Graduate School

If you're like many Vassar students, you've probably given some thought to attending graduate or professional school. Success in grad school can depend on the extent to which you have thought through your career and educational goals. It's a decision that deserves careful consideration. Here are some issues to think about.

Factors to Consider When Thinking About Graduate School

Reasons to enroll in a graduate program:

- 1) You love a particular subject and want to study it in depth, and/or
- 2) You need an advanced degree to enter the profession of your choice.

If factors other than these are shaping your decision, you may want to think carefully before proceeding.

For instance, people who are apprehensive about venturing into the job market may view grad school as a way to postpone difficult career decisions. While an advanced degree can make you more marketable for some occupations, it's not necessarily the key to finding satisfying employment.

Many students also face pressure to attend graduate school from parents, peers, or well-meaning mentors. Perhaps law school is a tradition in your family, or as a high achiever you've been urged to pursue an academic career. Make sure the advice you heed from others reaffirms your personal goals. Graduate study is focused and highly self-directed; it's difficult to make a go of it when you're not motivated from within.

Are you ready to commit to a particular field of study?

Perhaps you're sold on the idea of graduate school, but are unable to choose a specific field. You may be able to define your interests before graduation by researching areas of study online and in the CDO's Career Library, talking to professors, and reading institutional literature. If that doesn't help, a year or more away from school may give you a clearer perspective. Many professional schools prefer that applicants have a few years of work experience before applying. Also, consider how interested you are in studying a particular body of knowledge. Are you attracted to theory and research, or is it the degree at the end of the program that excites you? An advanced degree may not be the only way to success. In the performing arts, for example, or the business world, real-life experience can be more valuable than graduate seminars.

Understanding your preferred learning style can help you not only to choose what sort of program would be most appropriate, but also to assess the benefits of graduate or professional school in general.

Have you thought about long-range career and lifestyle goals?

Whatever your motives for going to graduate school, it's a good idea to think about the impact that experience will have on your life. Will the degree prepare you for a specific occupation or career field? If so, what is the employment outlook like? When you select a graduate field of study, you're also to some degree defining a profession and a lifestyle. Can you envision yourself as a physician, an art history professor, or a psychologist?

Make arrangements to talk with people in the field (Vassar professors, alumnae/i, family friends) about the rewards and drawbacks of the path you're considering. Currently enrolled graduate students can provide valuable insights as well.

A full-time Master's program usually takes one to two years, while PhDs and some professional degrees require three or more. During this period you'll focus intensely on your academic subjects and the people in your program, forfeiting salary, workday routine, and free time. Are you comfortable with the thought of spending two to seven more years as a student? Perspective is important, and a sense of long-term direction can make your graduate school experience more meaningful.

Is it worth the financial investment?

Given the costs you and/or your family have incurred at Vassar over the past few years, this can be a legitimate concern. Everyone places a different value on education, and ultimately you'll have to decide if graduate study is worth a financial sacrifice. Before making that decision, however, you should familiarize yourself with potential funding sources.

Fellowships, or scholarships, may be awarded by individual departments or institutions, as well as outside organizations. Institution-based aid most frequently takes the form of a graduate assistantship. Graduate (or teaching, or research) assistants work part-time in exchange for a stipend and/or tuition reimbursement. Loans are the primary source of government assistance. If you are open to the thought of working full time and taking classes on the side, there are some employers who offer tuition reimbursement as part of their benefit package.

The types of aid available to you will vary tremendously from one institution or program to another. Make sure you investigate fully before closing off your options. The Office for Fellowships and Pre-Health Advising (M-N162) has information on both Vassar and national fellowships.

Where can you locate more specific information?

Graduate and professional school information can be found in various places on campus. Each year, the CDO hosts a variety of graduate and professional school information sessions. We have information in our career library as well as on our website about graduate admission tests (GRE, LSAT, MCAT and GMAT). You can also speak with a counselor about how to identify alumnae/i who attended particular schools or studied in specific areas.

Prospective medical students, as well as those interested in fellowships, can find assistance in the Office for Fellowships and Pre-Health Advising (Main - N162).

Finally, we strongly encourage you to consult with faculty members. Most academic departments maintain information on graduate programs in their disciplines, and college and university catalogs are often available online.

Applying to Graduate School

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 section is designed for those who have already made a commitment to graduate study in a particular field.

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 that 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 jobseekers? (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.)

Resources to Research Graduate Programs

- The Peterson’s Guides (<http://www.petersons.com>) are an excellent comprehensive resource.
- Visit <http://www.gradschools.com> or <http://www.gradprofiles.com> to research programs.
- Talk with a counselor about how to obtain information on Vassar alumnae/i who have gone to the schools that interest you.
- 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.

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 do 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.

For more information on how to write personal statements, see our “Writing the Personal Statement” Career Brief.

Resume or CV

Drop into the CDO for a critique or download a resume guide from our website for assistance.

Transcripts

Request official copies of your transcript from the registrar’s office of every college you 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. Most registrar’s offices will have a form you’ll need to complete to request your transcript be sent to specific schools and often require 2-5 business days to process your requests, so plan accordingly.

Standardized Tests

Commonly required tests are the GRE (most academic disciplines), LSAT (law), GMAT (business), MAT (sometimes 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 to 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 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 that 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. Recommenders should be given at least a month's notice (at the very least) to write letters of recommendation for you.

The Career Development Office 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.

Graduate School Application Timeline

While application deadlines vary widely by program, here is a general timeline for how best to apply to graduate programs:

Junior Year (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 when the opportunity presents itself.
- If you're interested in applying to medical or other health-related programs, visit the Office of Fellowships and Pre-Health Advising office (M-N162).

Rising Seniors (Summer before 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 and medical school.

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.