Applying to Graduate and Professional School

INTRODUCTION

The decision to attend a graduate or professional school is one that will take a great deal of thought and planning. Pursuing more education after BVU will require a whole new commitment of time, money, and effort. This booklet is intended as a starting point for your decision and offers a basic understanding of both the decision itself and the process of applying.

First, let’s compare where you are now with what graduate work is going to be like.

Comparisons between Graduate Work and Undergraduate Work

In general, a graduate program involves specialized knowledge and concentrated study in one area. Your BVU undergraduate degree also involves some specialized knowledge -- your major -- but the degree you’re earning now includes a much broader range of subjects -- your general education courses and electives. You also have many co-curricular opportunities that are an integral part of your education.

Graduate work will be much more focused and specific.

Some of the goals of your BVU undergraduate education include developing your critical thinking, speaking and writing ability, making a persuasive argument, and learning how to research and evaluate information. Graduate study takes you to a higher level in all of these areas, and will require greater intensity, commitment and a much higher level of active participation in research and study.

Should You Go?

You first need to ask yourself: What are your career goals? When you know that, you will be in a position to evaluate whether you should go to graduate school. Some careers require more education in order to do the kind of work you aspire to. For others, graduate school is an option, but it will enhance your qualifications for the career path you are on.

DEGREES YOU CAN EARN

In general, there are two kinds of graduate degrees: professional degrees and research degrees.

There are two main levels: master’s degrees and doctoral degrees. (If in education, you can also earn an “in between” degree called an Educational Specialist.)

Professional degrees are ones that train you to work in a specific field, like Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), Juris Doctor (J.D.-- law), Doctor of Dentistry (D.D.S.), Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.), and the Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.).

Research degrees provide experience in research and scholarship, and the most common ones are the Master of Science (M.S.), Master of Arts (M.A.), and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). The Ph.D. is the primary credential for college teaching, but takes you in many other professional directions as well, such as consulting and research.
If you want to get a feel for just how many variations there are in the types of graduate degrees, look in the back of your academic catalog, and see what degrees your professors hold. There are many!

THE CHOICE

As a college student, you are already making a lot of important decisions and choices – choice of major, a career direction, lifestyle, and possibly a life partner. It’s also a time to look at the choice of whether you are right for graduate school.

Benefits of Graduate Work

Graduate school allows you to continue to pursue an interest – to learn more about something that you already love to learn about.

Graduate school can help you advance in your career (e.g. classroom teacher to principal), or it can be required to advance in your career (e.g. social work), or it can be necessary to even get started in your career (e.g. physician).

A graduate degree has the potential to increase your earning power. It’s true that when you “learn more you earn more.”

People with graduate degrees report greater job satisfaction and likewise more status in the working world with more career options.

Questions to Ask Yourself:

When visualizing yourself in graduate school:

How do you feel about living without making a lot of money for a while longer? And possibly borrowing more?

Do you like to study?

Do you enjoy writing papers?

Are you okay with making verbal presentations in front of groups or your professors?

Do you occasionally read books or periodicals in your field of study even if they are not assigned?

Do you procrastinate when it comes to studying for tests or writing papers, or do you stay on top of your coursework?

Do you occasionally read recent issues of professional journals in your field?

Do you like (or not dislike) library research?

Are your grades mostly A’s and B’s?

Can you carry out projects and study without direction from anyone else?
Rate yourself on the following personal characteristics which are important for success in graduate school:

- Intelligence
- Initiative
- Self-discipline
- Persistence
- Interpersonal skills.

DON’T go to graduate school is the only reason you’re going is to either 1) find yourself, or 2) avoid the job market a little longer. You won’t be happy with your decision if that’s what you base it on.

DON’T go if you’re tired of school. Stop the educational process and get a job instead. You can go later, in fact, people go to grad school at all ages and stages of life.

**HOW TO RESEARCH WHERE TO GO**

1) Talk to your professors or professionals already in the field. Find out where they went to school for their degree. You can learn about a particular program from someone who went there, and they may still know people at the program who could be influential in helping you get in.

2) Go to [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com). Search by discipline, geography, and other factors.

3) Come in to Career Services or the Main Library to use the hard copy of Peterson’s Guides to Graduate Programs.

**DECISION FACTORS**

Decide how much selectivity you want to deal with. Do you have your sites on a top tier graduate school? If you do, then you will need to prepare for a more competitive application process.

Your decision model should include selectivity, location, size of school, suitability and reputation of program, cost, financial assistance, atmosphere (cutthroat v. cooperative, exclusivity factor), size of program, faculty reputation, library and computer facilities, social resources.

Setting aside location, cost, and selectivity, you need to determine how well the graduate program fits your particular interests, academic background, and career goals. Although a university near you offers a graduate degree in a field you’re interested in, you will have to look further to determine whether they have the branch of this discipline that you want.

**Questions to Consider**

Ask yourself these questions as you decide which graduate programs might be right for you:

- Geographically, where do you want or need to live?
- How much is the tuition? What type of financial aid is available? Is housing is available?
What types of degrees are offered?

What is the emphasis of the program? Is it on practice or research?

What is the reputation of the university and this program specifically?

How many students are admitted in relation to the number of applicants?

What kind of facilities and resources are available – e.g. library, computers, social?

What are the research interests of the faculty? Are they similar to your interests?

Talk to students currently in the program. Are their interests and experiences similar to your own? Would you want to spend a lot of time with these folks?

Where are graduates from the program employed?

Is practical experience (internship, practicum) possible or part of the curriculum?

**TIMELINE**

Begin the application process no later than the summer before your senior year of college or at least a year before you plan to start graduate school. Many students who have had graduate school in mind for most of their undergraduate careers start much earlier. This timetable below is approximate, but it offers an idea of the steps you must think about and, roughly when you must complete each step. No generalized chart provides the specifics that you will need to meet your personal timeline.

As you refine your own timeline, carefully examine each application for their deadlines. They may vary significantly. Keep your timeline updated and follow it.

The Council of Graduate Schools ([http://www.cgsnet.org/](http://www.cgsnet.org/)) recommends:

**Summer before your Senior Year (or earlier)**

- Begin to draft a personal statement of your academic and professional goals.
- Start browsing through guides to graduate programs and graduate college catalogs.

**August-September**

- Meet with faculty members who you know to discuss your personal statement and learn about possible programs.
- Explore graduate programs. Become familiar with faculty research interests, entrance requirements, and deadlines.
- Contact graduate programs that interest you and request information.
- Review for the GRE exam or other required entrance exam.
- Alert faculty that you’ll be asking for letters of recommendation.
- Begin to develop your personal timeline for the application process.
October

- Take standardized tests.
- Determine the schools to which you plan to apply, and request application materials.
- Finish your timeline based on each institution’s deadline and financial aid deadlines.
- Complete your personal statement, adjusting it to meet each application’s specific needs.
- Order transcripts from all post-secondary institutions you’ve attended.
- Complete application forms. Most are on their web site.
- Give your recommendation writers all the information that they will need to write recommendations for you for each of the schools you’re applying to.

December/January

- Mail or submit applications. Even if deadlines are later, it is good to get the applications in early.

February

- Contact programs about the possibility of visiting. Make trips if possible.

April

- If you are applying for need based financial aid programs, you may have to file a copy of your federal income tax return.
THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Be sure to read carefully exactly what is required of you. A typical set of application materials include: the application form, a personal statement, official transcripts, letters of recommendation, test scores and your application fee. Some programs may ask for examples of your work, for example a portfolio of your art.

Application Form

This is often the first piece of information faculty admissions committee members see. It needs to make a good impression. Be sure that it contains everything requested, is readable, and arrives on time. Online applications can usually be saved and worked on at different times until they are complete. Be careful about spelling or grammatical errors! Pay attention to where to send the application – it may be either to a graduate school administrative office OR to an academic department. Keep a file copy and be prepared to pay a substantial fee.

Transcripts

Contact the registrar of every school you’ve attended since high school and ask them to send an official transcript to each program to which you are applying. Be prepared to pay a fee. The BVU the Registrar’s Office charges $6.00 for the first transcript, and if on the same request form, $3.00 for any additional transcripts. Phone, email, and unsigned requests are not accepted. You can download a form on the Registrar web page. Allow plenty of time for your records to be sent.

Letters of Recommendation

Required by all programs, recommendation letters are very important. First hand accounts from faculty and others who are familiar with you and your scholarship will carry quite a bit of weight. Who should write them? Your academic advisor is a good choice, and other faculty who know you well. Someone already in your field of study, especially if they graduated from their program, can be influential. Generally you’ll need to provide three references.

Take time to meet with those who you ask to write on your behalf. Don’t make this a casual conversation in the hall. Make an appointment and make sure they know what programs you’re considering. Give them a packet containing addressed stamped envelopes so they can mail their letters directly to the school, a statement that includes specifics that distinguish you, a copy of your resume and an unofficial copy of your transcript. Be sure to go back and thank them later!

Personal Statement

The importance of your personal statement cannot be emphasized enough. The other parts of your application consist mainly of objective, hard data: your grades, test performance and what others think of you. Your essay is a reflection of your personality, your intellect and your passion for the subject matter. It is an opportunity to set yourself apart and sell your qualifications. Similar to a job interview, you’ll want to use your statement to tell the admissions committee what kind of scholarly contribution you hope to make by being in their program, and tell it in an interesting way. Remember, admissions committee members read many of these all the time!
How to Write a Personal Statement

Judith Carruthers, Director of Career Development at Castleton College, authored this section, based on *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate & Professional School*, by Richard J. Stelzer 3rd edition. This book is available for checkout in the BVU Career Services Library.

There are two types of Personal Statements:
1. General, comprehensive Personal Statement - wide open as to what you write.
2. Personal Statements in response to specific questions.

Always make sure you address the specific questions posed in the application.
You should THINK about what you want to say for several weeks before putting pen to paper.

Prepare:
- Questions to ask yourself first:
  - Why are you special?
  - What details in your life, people or events that have influenced you in your goals will set you apart?
  - When did you become interested in the field?
  - What have you learned about it - and yourself? That has further stimulated your interest?
  - How did you learn about this field?
  - What leadership or management skills have you learned through working?
  - What are your career goals?
  - Gaps? Discrepancies in your academic record that need explaining?
  - Overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships?
  - What personal characteristics do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in the field? Can you demonstrate or document these characteristics? (Integrity, compassion, persistence, etc)
  - What skills do you possess? Leadership, communicative, analytical, etc.
  - Why might you be a stronger candidate for grad school and therefore more successful and effective in the profession than other applicants?
  - What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?
  - If a school wants to know why you are applying to them and not some other school, research and find an appropriate answer.

Tell a story:
- Be truthful, stick to facts.
- Think in terms of telling an interesting story.
- Fresh, lively, different.
- Make yourself memorable.

Find an angle:
- Not everyone’s life is a movie script, but do find what’s interesting about you.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph:
- Your lead statement is the most important. Introduce the elements most relevant to that story and what will hold the readers’ interest.
Tell who you are:
Give the committee a sense of who you are, what makes you tick. Perhaps that you have a realistic perception of what this field or profession entails. Refer to actual experiences - work, research, classes, conversations with people in the field, books, seminars, etc. Be selective about what you tell them - the Personal Statement is an indication of your JUDGMENT. Be positive and upbeat.

Review your personal history:
Make sure at least one of the people who reviews your personal statement is someone who knows you well. People are known to leave out really really important things!

What not to include:
- Leave out high school years or earlier - unless REALLY relevant.
- Stay away from controversial subjects - religion and politics.
- Nothing unconventional.
- BE SELECTIVE.
- Don't go over word limits!
- Typos. Non-grammatical sentences.

Try to decide what you would say in person if you only had 5 minutes to convince the committee.

Business school applications:
- They are usually a series of essays unlike medical and law schools.
- Usually require responses to 3 questions minimum - Harvard requests SEVEN!
- Some now also have an optional essay for discussing important, relevant material, which the other essays didn't cover. Use with discretion.
- Some questions cover ethical dilemmas, situational ethics questions.

Chief mistakes:
Not analyzing yourself & your objectives beforehand
Composing "generic" piece that could be sent to just about any school
Boring the admissions committee
Fabricating, dishonesty
Not using spell check
Unrealistic career goals
No knowledge of industry
Can’t express which program is right for them
Not having many editors
Narrating your own resume without reflection or evaluation
Writing "what the 'admissions office' wants to hear"
Self-glorification
Vagueness
Too gimmicky, too creative

Chief mistake of all: Sending it in before it’s done. DON'T SEND IN FIRST DRAFTS. SIT ON THEM FOR AWHILE.
TESTS

Go to www.gradview.com/testing for a good comprehensive web site and will tell you which test you need to take for the degree program you’re considering.

Graduate Record Exam (GRE):

Many graduate programs require the GRE. There are two parts to this test, the General and the Special. The General will be required, and you may be required to take a specialized subject test. Make sure you know which are required by the programs you’re applying to.

Take the GRE at the end of your junior or beginning of your senior year. Be sure to visit www.gre.org for complete guidance. You can take the GRE at Western Iowa Tech Community College in Sioux City. If you go to www.gre.org, you will find their location and phone number. You will also find the information for the test center at Iowa State and around the country. Just call ahead and schedule a time to take the test.

Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT):

The GMAT is used with graduate programs in business. Talk to business professors about this test, and go to http://www.mba.com/mba for lots of helpful advice and information.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT):

This test is used for admission to medical schools. Visit these websites: Association of American Medical Colleges (http://www.aamc.org/) and American Medical College Application Service (http://www.aamc.org/students/amcas/).

Law School Admissions Test (LSAT):

This test is used for admission to law school. Visit this website for complete information: Law School Admissions Council (http://www.lsac.org/)

Other Tests:

Miller Analogies Test – MAT – analytical test used by some graduate school programs
Dental Admissions Test – DAT
Veterinary College Admission Test – VCAT
Optometry Admission Test – OAT
Pharmacy College Admission Test – PCAT
QUESTIONS TO ASK PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

Whether you visit the school or just communicate via phone and email, these are important questions to ask representatives of a graduate school program:

- How reliable is your financial support from year to year? Is the first year offer always sustained, provided I attain grades?
- What is the average time to complete the 1) course work, 2) research, and 3) dissertation?
- What are the criteria and process for selecting Teaching Assistants, Graduate Assistants, and Fellows?
- May I meet some currently enrolled students (either in person or via email)?
- Where are your graduates working, what percentage are not employed?
- How are advisors assigned?
- What is the faculty turnover rate?
FINANCING YOUR DEGREE

According to www.gradschools.com, there are many financial resources available, including scholarships, grants, loans, fellowships, and assistantships. Be sure to visit http://www.finaid.org/otheraid/grad.phtml early in the process and talk to each school’s financial aid staff to find out what resources are available to you.

There are three main ways to finance your advanced degree: need-based, merit-based, and targeted (aimed at special populations). Aid programs are available in all three of these categories, both at the federal level and at the institution itself.

Even if you did not qualify for financial assistance at BVU as an undergrad, you may qualify as a graduate student for one or more of these reasons:
1) graduate school is often more expensive,
2) there are more merit-based aid programs such as teaching assistantships that are determined locally, and/or
3) graduate school is more demanding, therefore you will have less chance to have outside work, which in turn decreases the size of your own financial contribution.

Many graduate students receive aid in the form of an assistantship, which usually requires a half-time commitment (20 hours per week) to teach undergraduate courses or gain practical work experience in your field of study. Be sure to ask about deadlines for assistantships; they are almost always earlier than the deadline for admission to the program itself.

You’ll need to fill out these forms:

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- College Scholarship Services (CSS) Similar to FAFSA but used to determine eligibility for school-specific aid.
- other forms specific to each school.

Always contact the financial aid office at the schools early in the process to get the most complete picture of your costs and available aid.

PART-TIME OR FULL-TIME

In some career fields there are options for obtaining a graduate degree while keeping your full-time job. Investigate both online and part-time graduate degree programs as well as the more traditional programs if this is an option in your chosen field. Business and law are examples of graduate programs where you may find flexibility. Like everything else, there are pros and cons to this decision. Scholarships and loans may favor a full-time student, but sometimes employers will pay for all or part of your degree if you continue to work for them while in school.

If you're changing careers, full-time study may make the most sense. To help you decide, find out how welcoming a school is to part-timers. Are Saturday and evening classes offered? What are the hours for libraries, labs and other important resources? Is the part-time program the same quality as its full-time counterpart?
FAVORITE WEB SITES

College Source: www.collegesource.org – database of 63,000+ digital college catalogs, institution profiles, transcript keys, and other critical resources.

Gradschools.com: www.gradschools.com -- comprehensive graduate school directory and info

Gradview.com: www.gradview.com – comprehensive graduate school directory and info

US News and World Report: www.usnews.com and click on Rankings and Guides

Financial Aid: www.finaid.com Use search button for graduate school or go to http://www.finaid.com/otheraid/grad.phtml

Peterson’s: www.petersons.com -- click on Grad School Center – comprehensive graduate school information

Princeton Review: www.princetonreview.com -- test prep information

PRINT RESOURCES


FINAL THOUGHTS

This booklet* is intended to serve as a starting point for you. The process of being admitted to graduate school will take time, self-reflection, and lots of research and planning. It’s a big decision. Use your resources at BVU to help you. Talk to as many people as you can, start early, and remember that your Career Services staff is here to assist you. Good luck!

*The information in this booklet was gathered over a period of years from many sources including

- the online and print sources cited in this handbook
- ACES workshops presented by Bob Fuller, former Graduate Admissions Director at the University of South Dakota
- Sherry Morain, former career counselor at Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa, and
- the Career Services staff at Cornell College, Mount Vernon, Iowa.

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