



10 Essential Steps for Applying to Grad School

HOW TO GET INTO GRAD SCHOOL

June 17, 2015 / Michael Stone

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You have your eyes on a graduate degree. Will this make you more successful?

For the money-minded, yes. As of the most recent figures from the Pew Research Center, noticeable per-month salary discrepancies exist between degree levels: \$3,836 for bachelor's, \$4,772 for master's, and \$5,799 for professional or doctorate. These averages are from 2009 data, translated into 2012 dollars, and released last year — but hopefully us folks in 2015 still understand the values.*

Some degrees — health care, computers, engineering — will advance you more than others — liberal arts, biology, human resources. Such assessments are, again, often based on salary numbers, so never forget to add the reasons for your soul, too.

Now that you've decided a graduate degree is right for you, here are 10 steps on how to get there.

1. Prepare Your Head

Always press forward and never stop. Do acknowledge, though, that the climb won't be easy. Think of your undergrad assignments as writing two short stories compared to the master's novella (including thesis) or doctoral novel (including dissertation).

Becky Marshall — who is set to start her three-year curriculum toward a master of design degree from the Illinois Institute of Technology this fall — discussed how she's "surrounded by grad school life day-to-day," with her sister in a master of public health program, and her roommate "in her billionth year of schooling to become a psychologist."

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“They are constantly busy and on the go,” the 26-year-old said, “so I understand, intellectually at least, that I’m about to go through something very difficult and rigorous.”

2. Matching goals with coursework

Probably the worst thing you could do is pick a program based on its title and advertised description alone because it could turn out to be nothing like you expected. For example, say you enrolled in Awesome University’s Computer Science Studies master’s program and expected to learn some practical software, but all you end up doing is papers, papers, and, yes, more papers.

Have no fear — there’s a quick fix! If you’re interested in a program, find out the classes you would be taking. The syllabus for each class is often posted online, but if it isn’t, the professor won’t mind you request it by email.

With all the class assignments in hand, you’ll know *exactly* what you’ll be doing in graduate school.

3. On campus vs. virtual

There’s no doubt that, in many ways, an online degree is easier: no moving, often work at your own pace.

If possible, though, relocating to an apartment near campus should be a top priority. There, you’ll be able to develop the personal relationships that provide mentoring, networking, and friendship.

In addition, you’ll have access to on-campus resources, such as labs,

equipment, and the greatest of stress relievers, the gym.

4. Narrow your search

About five schools is a good number for your short list. Here are some good questions to ask when narrowing to this number:

Can I go for free under a research or teaching assistantship? Do I need to stay close to my current work because it's paying for grad school? Does the school rank highly on several reputable lists? (I used to believe individual merit, not school name, resulted in the dream job, but unfortunately, in judging a mountain of resumes, employers do often scan for the common all stars.) Does the school have a thriving alumni network?

Also, don't let application fees stand in your way of applying to more schools. It's your future!

5. Individual professors' backgrounds

Another key to narrowing the search is isolating potential mentors by reading about faculty members on the school's website and elsewhere on the Web.

One of the best things to do is contact appealing mentors before applying. They could be able to fund your assistantship (but don't mention this upfront or expect it) and provide additional insights into the program and your overall career.

6. But do *they* want you

Most of the time, you don't have to exceed expectations with each one of

your application materials: GRE score, personal statement and any other essays, resume/CV, letters of recommendations, undergraduate transcript. But collectively, these should wow, especially if you're trying for an assistantship or even a fellowship.

If your GRE is dramatically lower than what many or all of your potential schools expect, don't be afraid to retake it. Check to see if your program even mixes and matches your top scores from each of the GRE sections. In other words, you might be able to take the 150 verbal score from your first try and the 140 quantitative from your second to make a better overall score.

7. Devotion to Graduate Record Examination studying

Getting at least decent GRE scores is a challenge, regardless of how s-m-a-r-t you've become since you last took a standardized test. Probably the main question you're asking is, "Between perusing online materials, doing practice questions in books, and maybe even taking a class, how much time should I spend on studying?"

It's hard to estimate this in terms of months because a month of your studying might total a lot more time than my month studying. Instead, go hours, which test-prep giant Kaplan argues should be between 50 and 200. A wide range, yes, but everyone is different.

As said above, don't be afraid of the retake. Also, you can knock the GRE out way ahead of actual applications, as the scores are good for five years.

8. Spend (lots of) time on your

applications

Now we know that studying for the GRE is a mountain itself. But writing the application essays should take time, too, if you revise and personalize each one per program.

“I place great importance on the personal statement part of applications,” said Daniel Bluestone, director of the master’s in preservation studies program at Boston University. “The question I often ask is whether your program is the next logical step in an applicant’s education and career trajectory.

“Showing thoughtfulness on this issue is important. Framing the argument well suggests an ability to deal critically with the subjects we teach.”

9. Are you a pro?

Nothing impresses schools more than pro experience, especially if you’re trying to grab one of those free-school-providing assistantships or fellowships. Be sure to brag about such experience on your resume.

“Over 80 percent of our applicants and admittees come to us with some professional or NGO or other out-of-school experience,” said Isha Ray, head graduate adviser at Berkley’s energy and resources program. “We like that, and think it adds to their depth and maturity.”

10. Map it all out

All these steps in finding the right graduate program can turn into a mixed-up cluster of stress — if you let them. Write everything down, map it out in a

calendar and take your time, which leads to better application packages and thus better opportunities. Don't be surprised if it takes you a year or more to go from looking at schools to sitting down in your first graduate class.

All the while, keep in mind that the benefits of graduate school are there. Just be ready to power through the major commitment of about two year's for a master's and three-plus for a doctorate. And it will be your *better* life.

**Pew Research Center, "For Millennials, a Bachelor's Degree Continues to Pay Off, but a Master's Earns Even More"*

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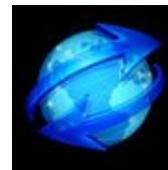
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