

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

Considering Graduate School

Graduate school is a logical step for people whose ambitions require graduate or professional degrees (doctor, researcher, lawyer, professor). It is also great for those who enjoy their field and want to pursue their love of knowledge and/or conduct in-depth, comprehensive research in a special field of study.

While a graduate degree can be rewarding, it should not be undertaken lightly. It is more time consuming and costly than undergraduate studies. Take time to think carefully about what is motivating you to consider graduate school so it is a good decision for you. **Ideally, start the process 18 to 24 months prior to the semester you wish to enroll.**

To decide if graduate school is for you, ask the following:

1. What do you want to do once graduate school is complete? Where do you want to do it?
2. Is graduate school necessary for your occupation or valued by targeted occupations of which you plan to become a part (either a higher starting salary or faster advancement)?
3. What do you most want to learn about, be/become through graduate school? What are you looking to gain from your program (skills, knowledge, improved marketability)?
4. Are you passionate about some specific area in the field?
5. Is it better to go to graduate school directly after your undergraduate degree or better to get relevant industry experience first? What are pros and cons for each scenario?
6. Are all programs equally valued by employers you want to target?
7. Are you and others in your life prepared to make the adjustments necessary for you to succeed at the hard work required by graduate school?

What graduate schools consider

Getting accepted to graduate/professional school is usually very competitive and selection criteria and weighting change significantly from program to program. Candidates are often selected based on the following:

- Undergraduate GPA, entrance exam scores, relevant experiences or abilities
- Reference letters, references selected (often called referees) and relevance of comments from references
- Candidate suitability for the program – the link between interest and program focus, candidate clarity of purpose/direction/aim/interest – often explained through the application letter
- Quality of discipline-related writing sample
- Seating limitations vs. candidate pool (i.e., 20:100 vs. 20:30) which can vary year to year and school to school
- Performance at an interview or mini-multiple interviews, called MMIs
- Deadline compliance, completeness of application, following application directions

Exploring Programs

Once you have decided that graduate school is right for you, create a robust list of possible programs that fit with your professional interests. Compare and contrast pros and cons of each to narrow which programs will be a good environment and best meet your academic goals. Consider speaking to:

- Current professors
- Employers
- Current students
- Past students
- Grad committee members
- Program advisors
- Prospective supervisors

The Application Process

Admission requirements may include an application form, application fee, transcripts (GPA), undergraduate prerequisite courses, references, reference letters, statement of intent/purpose/intended research, resume/curriculum vitae (CV), writing sample, specific experience, supplementary forms, and completion of entrance exams (GMAT, DAT, OAT, MCAT, LSAT, GRE, etc.).

Start applications at least one year before you intend to begin a program. Give yourself sufficient time to prepare. Each component takes more time than expected. Plan to send in application forms and fees well before the deadlines.

- Budget enough to cover application expenses (fees, transcripts, testing, postage, trips, calls)
- Get forms and program information – connect with the department and admissions, especially when requesting additional information about programs, faculty research interests, and financial aid availability
- Pick up/subscribe to bulletins for required admissions tests. Take these no later than October of your senior year. Budget time to adequately prepare for admissions tests
- Identify a relevant paper writing sample. Rework it to ensure it reflects your best professional writing ability
- Obtain letters of recommendation from faculty, especially those in the discipline you wish to enter. Choose faculty who are aware of your work and academic interests and, where possible, possess acknowledged reputations. Get their permission to serve as references and discuss your plans with them
- Application requirements for schools and admissions tests vary greatly. Make sure to meet deadlines. If you cannot, call the institution to see if a late application will even be considered. **Note:** Deadlines for financial aid may be earlier or later than program deadlines

References

- Identify who might serve as good references, also called referees; set appointments to meet with each to talk about your goals and answer any questions they may have
- Once decided, put together a package for each reference that contains your resume or CV, your career/employment goals, research interests, list of schools being considered and instructions for each

Strengthen your application

- Attend conferences, events, presentations
- Connect with potential supervisors to discuss research and confirm the possibility of working with them



Questions to consider asking when exploring schools and programs

QUESTIONS	CONSIDER ASKING						
	Institution	Program Advisors	Prospective Supervisors	Undergrad Professors	Current Grad Students	Grad School Graduates	Employers
What programs are offered in your specialized area of interest?	x	x		x			x
Can the program be taken full-time/part-time/distance? What is the typical or maximum time to complete the program?	x	x				x	
Is it a single or multi-disciplined program?	x	x					
Is there a residency/language proficiency requirement?	x	x					
Is the program accredited or recognized by a certain jurisdiction (provincial, national, international)? This is especially important if considering international programs.	x	x		x		x	x
Are there faculty members with interests common to yours?		x	x	x			
What/how many courses or optional sessions pertain to your area of interest or needs? How often are they offered? Every semester, annually, bi-annually?	x	x					
What is the typical application-to-admission ratio and admission-to-completion ratio?	x	x					
What does graduate student life consist of? What activities, programs, services, clubs, groups, support for special needs are available? What interaction opportunities are there with other grad students (e.g., grad student society) and/or faculty?	x	x			x	x	
How many faculty are in the program? What are their credentials and reputation? Where did they receive their training? What are their research and teaching interests, and availability to be your prospective supervisor?	x	x					
What is unique about the courses/programs/reputation of the school? Of the professional interests of faculty?	x	x					
What financial supports are available (federal, provincial, scholarships, bursaries, awards)? How much is available? How are recipients selected? Are there Teaching Assistant positions or other income opportunities?	x	x		x		x	x
What resources/facilities are available for students (e.g., library collections, laboratory equipment)?	x	x	x		x	x	
What employment outcomes can be expected? Where are past grad students employed?		x	x			x	x
What employers, employer groups, professional groups and licensing bodies recognize the program?		x					x
What costs are associated with the program (application, exam fees, tuition, materials, travel, etc.)?	x	x	x		x	x	
Is it a thesis or course-based program? What are major project or paper requirements?	x	x	x				
What career services are available to grad students?		x			x	x	
Are supervisors chosen or assigned? Which supervisors are available to mentor during your enrollment? What type of research have they conducted and what current research is being done?	x	x			x	x	
What unofficial advantages can this grad school/program offer (i.e., connections)?		x				x	x



Staying On Track

The guideline below is a starting place to develop your own plan. It is critical to always check with the institutions and programs you are interested in for specific information, requirements and deadlines. Programs may have early decision policies or rolling admissions in addition to the more common set admission times. Consider creating a spreadsheet to track deadlines and keep information organized.

One year out

- Identify schools and programs to apply to. In addition to your own research, speak with your professors. They are a good resource about top programs and departments in their field
- Identify restrictions, prerequisites and test dates, if any. This is especially critical for international study
- Identify deadlines for applications and whether in-person interviews are part of the application process
- Identify possible financial support sources and the application requirements and deadlines of each

Prior fall

- Complete drafts for applications and financial supports – get feedback
- Identify and approach references, and provide them with the information they will need to understand what each graduate school you are considering requires
- Explore research being done at Mount Royal that may be of interest and would add relevant experience to your application

Prior winter

- Do a detailed comparison of programs against your preferences to ensure you will make the best choice if accepted to more than one program (usually March/April)

Spring/summer

- Visit all schools likely to be seriously considered; meet people in person, if possible
- Reply to all offers
- Ensure financial supports are finalized and details clearly understood

Tips

- ✓ Prepare questions in advance and organize by “to call” or “at visit” to ensure you make the best use of your time
- ✓ Register and prepare to write required entrance exams (DAT, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT, etc.)
- ✓ Research all options available to finance your education
- ✓ Consider both direct and indirect costs
- ✓ Retain copies of all application materials, dates sent, calls made, people talked to and discussion notes

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