

# Planning for Graduate School E-GUIDE

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## DECIDING TO APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

People decide to apply to graduate school for many reasons. Some strong reasons to apply for graduate school include when a graduate education:

- is necessary for your desired professional field such as health care, law, teaching, and social work to name a few
- can improve your career by increasing your responsibility and/or income earning potential
- can enhance your professional prospects, whether you are switching careers or simply want greater flexibility and options
- serves to satisfy your intellectual curiosity and passion

Whatever your rationale, you should not take the decision lightly, as pursuing a graduate education requires a significant investment of your financial and personal resources. In other words, you want to be able to dedicate as much of your attention, energy, and time as possible towards earning your degree and enjoying and making the most of your grad school experience. This is why you may want to meet with a Career Coach and reevaluate your readiness for a graduate education if any of the following are a significant or the most significant factor in your interest in applying to grad school:

### Reasons why graduate school may NOT be a strong choice:

- **You are avoiding personal/family/financial obligations**  
Graduate school is stressful enough. Rather than providing a solution to other issues going on in your life, it will most likely aggravate them. There are healthier and more affordable ways to resolve difficult personal challenges. If you are trying to resolve a personal problem, seeking advice from a counselor, a financial advisor, or another professional is far more likely to help you than taking on the additional rigors of grad school.
- **You are avoiding or having difficulty in the job hunt**  
If you are avoiding the job hunt—especially if this is your first job out of college—realize that when you complete grad school, you will find yourself in the same position again. Employers place a great deal of weight on your experience, not just your education. Most Graduate Admissions staff members prefer to see some work experience. Your experiences will mutually enrich the value of your own education and that of your peers. Working, even in a less than ideal position within or outside of your field of interest, will provide its own learning and growth opportunities and help define your career interests, potentially changing your graduate education considerations down the road. Working first will help you decide if this field is really a good fit and if grad school is necessary after all. You may find that your job or career provides enough personal and professional development that you will not feel the need to obtain a graduate degree to advance in the field.

- **You do not know what to do with your life**

If this is the case, going to grad school is among the last things you should do. A graduate education can be an invaluable tool to help you accomplish what you want to do with your life, but it will not resolve any confusion or uncertainty about your career or life's purpose. The first and most important thing to do is to figure out what you do want to do by sitting down with a Career Coach to conduct some self-reflection and research and learn about your options!

- **You are dissatisfied with your current employment**

Grad school is a very expensive solution unless you were already considering graduate education prior to your current situation and feel that you have reached a point in your career where further education is necessary for advancement. If you do not like your current job, consider finding a new job. If that is not possible, try to make your job more satisfying by addressing the problems directly. An alternative to enrolling in a graduate program for a degree is to take professional development workshops, individual college classes, or certificate courses. Depending on your goals, a course or two may be all that you need.

- **You think a graduate degree is the only way to get ahead**

Do your research first. Do not think, but KNOW that graduate school is necessary. Talk to people who are doing what you want to do. Ask them if a degree is necessary or matters for that job or field. If so, ask which degree they recommend and seek their advice on when you should go to grad school. If not, ask them what the steps are to get to where they are and do what they are doing. You may not need a graduate degree to transition from a career as a marketing assistant to a development officer, an account executive to a program coordinator, or an engineer to a teacher. A continuing education course may provide the necessary skills without the expense and time commitment of a degree-granting program. Alternatively, some preliminary "field experience" through volunteering, interning, or getting an entry-level job in the area of interest can also help you gain more insight into what skills and background you would need. It can also help you get a foot in the door and, through a combination of networking and experience, potentially assist you in getting the job you want.

- **You have always been curious about a particular subject or field**

Exploring an interest can take many forms without having to commit the resources (time, money) required for grad school. Depending on how you like to learn, why not try one of these options to confirm your decision:

- Buy or borrow books to read about your interest.
- Join a membership organization that allows you to learn more about a topic through organized events such as discussions, lectures, and trainings.
- Take a continuing education class at your local community college.
- Volunteer with an organization that focuses on issues related to a particular topic.

## **WHEN TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL**

Deciding when to attend graduate school is an important decision within the graduate school application process and requires careful thought of what your immediate needs are given your career goals, level of motivation, the industry you want to enter into, your financial resources, and support system. Doing research first about the true value of a graduate education for someone with your professional interests is critical to making your decision. Making a "pros and cons" list can help you weigh your options. Below are some samples of general pros and cons to attending graduate school.

### **Pros/Cons of Working Before Grad School**

- **Pros**— gain experience; help determine area for graduate study; clarify career goals; assess likes/dislikes/abilities; company may offer tuition reimbursement; gives time to mature/learn/gain a perspective on the world outside academe; can enhance your application credentials when you do apply
- **Cons**—may not return to graduate school; lose study skills; financial considerations; more difficulty with trying to balance work/family/school further down the road

## Pros/Cons of Going to Graduate School Immediately after Undergraduate Degree

- **Pros**—may be required in some professions to obtain your career goals; still familiar with study skills and habits; desire to gain more training in your chosen field; no gap in your educational experiences; fewer personal obligations; may be able to defer loan payments
- **Cons**—burnout from continuous schooling; existing school loans may continue to build interest; no significant work experience to highlight when applying for jobs; some programs may prefer/require you to work first

## SELECTING THE RIGHT GRADUATE SCHOOL OPTION

### Conduct Research

Careful research will help you make an informed decision about which graduate programs, what kind of degree options, and what institutions will be a good fit for your professional goals. Research sources include the Internet, the Center for Career Services, Reinsch Library, speaking with your professors, campus visits, meeting with faculty and current graduate students at programs you are considering, conducting informational interviews with individuals currently in your career field of interest, and looking through professional research journals in your chosen academic discipline to see what universities are represented. Remember: it is vital that you find programs suited to your career needs – doing your research will allow you to identify programs that are a good fit!

### Know Degree Types

After conducting your research, the choice as to what type of graduate degree you should pursue will most likely be much clearer. When considering the merits of a master's versus a doctoral degree, bear in mind that both will give you in-depth training in a specialized field. The usefulness of each degree depends on your academic and career interests. The higher the degree, the longer it takes to earn and the more specialized is its focus. Once you understand the relatively narrow scope and use of a doctorate, you may have an easier time understanding the master's by comparison.

- **The Doctor of Philosophy or Ph.D.**
  - Ph.D.s and other research doctorates prepare students to initiate new projects that add to the collective knowledge base of the field.
  - Candidates for and holders of Ph.D.s often seek careers as professors and researchers, but many also go on to varied roles in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors.
  - Doctoral study offers a unique opportunity for an individual to conduct intensive and prolonged research on a very particular topic, which often leads to publication.
  - The research doctorate is the highest earned academic degree in U.S. postsecondary education.
  - Students entering a Ph.D. program have already earned a bachelor's degree and sometimes also a master's degree (depending on the Ph.D. program). Because of the nature of specialization, Ph.D. programs tend to be smaller than master's programs.
  - Ph.D. candidates begin by taking courses and exams, go on to taking advanced seminars and designing dissertation research, and complete their requirements by researching, writing, and defending a dissertation.
  - A dissertation is the doctoral-level thesis, the culmination of a Ph.D. candidate's research into a topic, and typically the major requirement of earning the doctorate.
  - Doctorates may take up to eight years to earn—depending on the program and whether the student has already completed a master's degree
- **The Master's Degree**
  - Master's degrees are more versatile than doctoral degrees and have a wide range of professional and academic applications. According to the U.S. Department of Education, **three types** of master's programs exist: *research, professional, and terminal*. Each of the following types of degree programs would require that a student has already earned a bachelor's degree in order to be considered as a potential candidate.
    - **Research master's degrees** are typically for academic and applied research disciplines.
      - Examples of the research master's degree include Master of Arts in History, Master of Arts in Comparative Literature, and Master of Science in Biology.

- Research master's enhance a student's research skills, prepare them for a Ph.D. program, and may help qualify them to teach in elementary, secondary, and community education settings.
  - In some fields, earning a research master's degree without going on to earn a Ph.D. severely restricts your professional options, so discuss your educational options and career trajectory with professors or professionals in your field.
  - **Professional master's degrees** prepare a person to do professional work by introducing practical skills and frameworks for understanding issues in their field and may lead to credentials necessary to practice in the field.
    - Examples of the professional master's degree include Master of Social Work, Master of Architecture, or Master of Art in Teaching
  - **Terminal master's degrees** are the highest academic degrees in a particular field; in other words, when a master's degree is terminal, you do not have to move on to a doctoral program in order to have a career within the field. As a result, some professional master's degrees are also terminal master's degrees.
    - Examples of terminal master's degrees include Master of Fine Arts, Master of Library Science, and Master of Business Administration
- Master's programs typically take one to three years.
- In some programs, students go on to research, write, and defend a master's thesis. In professional master's programs, the thesis is often replaced by final projects and exams.
- **Joint Degree Programs**
  - Graduate schools are offering more joint-degree programs in order to meet increasing student demand for specialized educational options.
  - A joint-degree program is one in which a student enrolls simultaneously in two graduate programs (usually within the same university) and works towards two graduate degrees with the support of both programs.
  - Some graduate programs come together through a formal agreement to design a way for a student to earn the two degrees (one in each program) in an abbreviated period.
  - At some schools, students may design their own joint-degree program through combinations of the following: law (JD), medicine (MD), doctorate (Ph.D. or other), professional master's (such as MPP, Ed.M), and/or academic master's.
  - Having two complementary degrees can be invaluable in establishing yourself as an expert in your niche field, both diversifying and specializing your skills and knowledge and expanding your network and the opportunities available to you.
  - A joint-degree program has many benefits as well as challenges, so be sure to take into account the extra level of planning and coordination required as you consider if this is the right choice for you.
  - Joint-degree programs are most commonly offered in law and business schools.
    - Some common joint-degrees include: Master of Business Administration & Juris Doctor (MBA/JD); Juris Doctor & Master of Public Policy (JD/MPP); Doctor of Medicine & Master of Public Health (MD/MPH); and Master of Business Administration & Master of Education (MBA/Ed.M.)
- **Certificate Programs**
  - A certification program is a set of courses in a particular field that lead to certificate status or a license to practice in a specialty area.
  - Certification can be an alternative to further schooling or a piece of your graduate education.
  - Your field dictates both what certifications are possible to obtain and the means to do so. Thus, prerequisites for certification can include any combination of the following: completing coursework, earning a degree, passing examinations, and/or successfully completing an internship or other experiential component.
  - More importantly, the value of your certification lies in the recognition you will receive from employers and peers, who understand it as testament to your accomplishment and competence.
  - To find out if a license is required for you to begin your practice, and/or whether certification enhances your employability, conduct informational interviews with professionals in your field and check with the

appropriate professional association(s) in your field to make sure that the certificate program you are enrolling in is accredited.

- Examples of certifications that are accredited with professional associations include:
  - *Geographic Information Systems certification* within a Master's of Geography program
  - *Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Accredited Professional Certification*, independent of a degree program
  - *Certification in Volunteer Administration*, independent of a degree program
  - *Certification for English Language Teaching for Adults (CELTA)*, independent of a degree program

### **Evaluating Program Fit & Quality**

Similar to your undergraduate application process, it is important to assess yourself honestly when deciding where to apply. Before you start your school search, you will benefit from writing down your top ten requirements of a grad school or department. For example, location may matter a lot, but a friendly atmosphere may not matter to you much at all. Here are some things to consider:

- Size of department or school
- Size of the average class you will take, or of your cohort
- Number of classes offered in your area of interest
- Accreditation status of program and university
- Demographic of your future classmates (mid-career professionals?, part-time vs. full-time?, commuters or people who live near campus?)
- Reputation of the school in your field and portability of the degree if you plan to move far away from that institution after you graduate
- Academic rigor of the school
- Prerequisites and course requirements ("core" courses)
- Quality of faculty
- Research areas, specializations, and professional and publication history of faculty
- Approachability of faculty (How do current and former students characterize the professors? Do faculty respond to your email? Do they greet and engage you when you visit their class?)
- Graduate assistantships/other funding opportunities available
- Location and setting of the school (Near home? Far away? Close to the urban hub of your field where you can find exciting internships regularly? Further afield? Green lawns? Concrete jungle? Climate?)
- Culture of the school or department
- Quality and size of the library and other student service facilities
- Housing costs and availability (on- or off-campus)
- Transportation needs (Can you get where you need to go by bus or bike? Do you have to have a car?)
- Quality of life in the city or town where the school is located (What is important to you when you are not in class? Good restaurants, farmers markets, movie theaters, outdoor activities, etc.)
- Career trajectories of alumni
- Ways of connecting with alumni—now, as a prospective student, and also when you are an alum yourself
- Other issues of importance to you – diversity, health care, rural/city, transportation, recreational opportunities, religious organizations, cultural opportunities, etc.

## FINANCING GRADUATE SCHOOL

### Financial Aid BEFORE You Apply

Financial aid awarded by schools can be split into two basic categories: **need-based** and **non-need-based** aid. Non-need based aid can sometimes be referred to as "merit-based aid" when it is awarded based on the merit of a student's academic performance, community activities, or athletic talent.

- **Need-based aid** will be granted in the form of subsidized government loans such as subsidized Stafford and Perkins loans (in which interest on the loan is deferred until after you graduate), work-study, and grants.
- **Non-need-based aid** will be granted in the form of unsubsidized government loans such as unsubsidized Stafford and Grad PLUS loans in which interest begins accruing while you are studying. Unless you can afford to fully fund your graduate education and still have money to live on as a student, the unsubsidized loans will help you cover the costs of grad school without you breaking the bank.
- **Will I qualify for Financial Aid?**
  - It is imperative for grad school applicants to apply for financial aid, even if you do not think you will qualify. All grad school applicants are considered independent, so you are already considered higher need. Do not assume that you will not qualify for financial aid without looking into it, even if you have a job, a home, and dependent family members!

### Financial Aid Tips for DURING the Application Process

- **Think of your application process as a relationship:** Developing and maintaining a good, professional relationship with the people in charge of your financial aid award is smart and just good common sense.
- **Apply for financial aid as early as you can** - whether you think you need it or qualify for it. The best time to apply is either alongside or shortly after your program application. From the Financial Aid staff perspective, determining financial aid is a complex and lengthy process, much like processing taxes. They are busy processing financial aid applications for many other prospective graduate students. The more time the staff has, the lengthier the consideration they can give your application. Also, schools often distribute the best financial aid options (grants, work-study, lower interest loans) on a first come, first serve basis.
- **Follow each program's instructions on applying:** While some elements of applying for financial aid—such as completing the [FAFSA](#)—are common for all programs, each grad school will have its own particular requirements on additional documentation and their submission process.
- **Be prepared and proactive:** Make copies of all documents. In the highly unlikely case that your financial aid application or its components are lost along the way, having copies of everything will enable you to quickly respond to whatever the financial aid office needs from you.
- **Do not put all your eggs in one basket:** Because all applicants to a program will be "competing" for part of the same pool of funding that the school can offer this year, it is smart to research and apply for as much independent funding, or "free money"—in the form of grants, fellowships, and scholarships from sources outside of the university—as you can. Free money is the best form of financial aid, even if it makes you ineligible for loans. Less loans = less debt.

### Financial Aid Tips for AFTER you have been admitted

- **Report any changes to your financial situation:** Changes to your financial situation can include receiving outside awards or experiencing unforeseen financial hardship since you initially applied for financial aid. Reporting changes immediately will allow the Financial Aid office to work with you to adjust your award package as necessary.
  - If you need additional financial aid, staff can help you figure out what options are available either in the form of grants or loans.
  - If you are supplanting financial aid with outside awards, you must contact the Financial Aid office to make necessary adjustments to your financial aid package.
- **Appeal your financial aid package if it is not sufficient:**
  - You want less of a certain loan, e.g., you want to decrease the amount of unsubsidized loans in your award.
  - You want less of a stipend (possibly work-study) that has a labor stipulation, e.g., you must tutor a certain number of hours per week in order to receive the stipend.
  - You would like a teaching assistantship (sometimes you have to ask for this).

- You really want to attend this program but got a better offer at another school.

## Funding Your Graduate Education

- **On-Campus Jobs:** you can find a wide array of on-campus jobs to help you fund your education. Some types of work (research and teaching assistantships, for example) commonly come with a lot of responsibility, reduced or waived tuition and fees, health insurance, and/or a stipend. Others (regular wage jobs) will garner you an hourly wage and possibly useful experience, time to study, or other perks.
  - Graduate Assistantships
    - **Research Assistantships:** Graduate Research Assistants (R.A.s) are graduate assistants who work on academic research projects under the guidance of a professor who has received funding for the project
    - **Teaching Assistantships:** Graduate Teaching Assistants (T.A.s) are graduate assistants who support the teaching of undergraduates. Duties often include holding office hours for tutoring a course's students (preparing them for exams and term papers, for example), grading exams and papers, teaching recitations of a large lecture course, or teaching their own smaller classes.
    - **Resident Assistantships:** Graduate Resident Assistants (confusingly, also called R.A.s, or G.R.A.s) are graduate assistants who are responsible for the general supervision and management of their residence halls.
  - Other Student Jobs on Campus
    - **Federal Work Study:** Graduate students in financial need may be awarded a work-study grant that allows them to earn up to a specified dollar amount per year. The department or office where they work pays them a percentage of their hourly wage, and the government pays the rest. Jobs designated as work-study are not open to students who have not been awarded a federal work-study grant, so work-study jobs may be less competitive than other regular wage student jobs.
    - **Regular Wage Student Jobs:** A variety of campus jobs are reserved for students carrying a minimum number of credit hours, including positions such as staffing the front desk of a residence hall, helping in the dining halls, editing a section of the student newspaper, and staffing the tech support desk in a computer lab. Student jobs tend to pay better than minimum wage, and your employers will work with (and around) your course schedule.
  - Staff Positions
    - **Staff positions** on a college or university campus include office and clerical support, maintenance and trades positions, and administrative, research, and instructional roles.
      - In addition to a salary or wage, staff positions often come with benefits related to tuition reduction or remission (for staff and for partners/children), health insurance, use of campus facilities, and more. Because you are on campus, your boss might be more willing than the average boss to work around your class schedule if you take daytime courses occasionally.
- **Scholarships:** There is a wide range of scholarships available to students. Some stipulate very specific qualifications, while others are more broad-based. It is worth taking the time to explore the full range of funding opportunities that may be available to you, as, unlike loans, scholarships DO NOT have to be paid back!
  - **Types of Scholarships:**
    - **Merit scholarships** are based upon achievement and can be awarded in such areas as academics, artistry, and athletics; they often promote study in that subject area.
    - **Diversity, or Minority, scholarships** are awarded to promote study and support students with diverse racial, religious, and/or ethnic backgrounds and orientations. These can be based upon need or awarded independently of financial consideration.
    - **Disability scholarships** are available through the federal government as well as many private organizations and associations, and are awarded to promote study and support students with physical, mental, or cognitive disabilities.
    - **Need-based scholarships** take into consideration a student's and/or family's financial situation. Need-based scholarships typically fall under one of the above categories, and therefore often stipulate one or more other eligibility requirements.

- **Service scholarships** vary by program and award, but if you are a current or former service program (AmeriCorps, Peace Corps) member, you may be eligible for an educational award through your program and/or scholarships through your school.
- **Research grants** differ from scholarships in that you must write your own proposal to apply for the grant, but this option may be available to you depending on your prospective field and the type of degree you want to obtain. They can be awarded through your graduate institution, a relevant professional association (e.g. American Psychological Association), or a related organization (e.g. Psi Chi – The National Honor Society in Psychology), in order to fund specific research.
- **Where to look for scholarships**
  - **Within your own network**
    - Friends and family can be an extra set of eyes and ears for you during your search. Perhaps they will know of something through their work or the organizations they are involved in.
  - **At your undergraduate institution and your prospective grad schools**
    - Tap into the resources available to you through both your undergraduate and prospective graduate institutions: career centers, professors, department chairs, and academic advisors are all great sources of information.
  - **At the national level**
    - Government departments and offices at all levels—federal, state, and local—offer various types of scholarships.
    - Research councils in most disciplines provide grants for research-based study.
    - Professional associations can also be found across most disciplines and cultural lines.
    - Foundations and charity organizations support diverse causes and peoples, and are organized both nationally and locally.
    - Journals and specialist magazines most likely exist in your field, and these publications often advertise scholarships.
  - **In your local community**
    - Institutions, organizations, and businesses usually offer scholarships to assist students in their communities.
    - Your local library is another great resource. Not only can you access subscription materials and databases that may list scholarships for free, you can also ask the librarians to help identify resources specific to you, your interests, and your field of study. They will likely have knowledge of both local and national funding opportunities.
    - Local and regional newspaper companies and associations may sponsor scholarships, or they may have a database of scholarships specific to your area.

## THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

### How many schools should I apply to?

- **Have a range of choices:** If you feel you have excellent prospects consider applying to fewer schools with more assurances of being accepted. If you feel you have average to limited prospects you may want to apply to a larger number. Some will be "safety schools" which you are confident you will be accepted to and others will be ones you hope will accept you.
- **Do not sell yourself short:** You may have the qualities that your "dream school" is seeking. Speak with your academic advisor and with faculty members in your field of interest about the conventional number of applications sent out and ask the reasoning behind this number.
- **Consider the Cost:** How much are you willing to spend on the application process? Costs can be steep and will rapidly add up. Estimate and total the costs versus the amount you are willing to spend.

#### Costs in addition to application fees:

- academic transcript request and financial aid fees
- fees associated with the processing of financial aid forms



- fees required for GRE, MAT, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT exams and for test report photocopying expenses and postage costs
- interview and campus visitation costs

\*\*\*Regardless of the number of schools you apply to, be sure to apply to schools that complement your academic background, fit your graduate school needs, and allow you to reach your career goals\*\*\*

### Application Procedures

Each institution you are considering will have their own process for applying to graduate school, so it is important to review and follow application procedures carefully. You will want to obtain the following types of materials from each school you are interested in during the application process, most of which can be found on the school's website:

- Graduate catalog—information on all programs and application requirements
- Departmental information and student profile of your specific graduate program
- Admissions applications
- Financial aid forms—federal, college/university, scholarship applications

### Graduate Admissions Exams

Almost all graduate programs will require you to take some type of standardized exam to be considered as a potential candidate. There are different exams based on different areas of study, so become familiar with what exam you will need to take by checking your school's application requirements. Here some of the most common graduate entrance exams with links to their overview websites:

- [MAT](#)—Miller Analogies Test
- [GRE](#)—Graduate Record Exam
- [LSAT](#)—Law School Admission Test
- [GMAT](#)—Graduate Management Admission Test
- [MCAT](#)—Medical College Admission Test
- [OAT](#)—Optometry Assessment Test
- [DAT](#)—Dental Admission Test
- [PCAT](#)—Pharmacy College Admission Test
- [PRAXIS](#) – a series of exams required by most Teacher Prep programs; needed for teacher certification & licensure in most states.

Many programs will list guidelines on their website for the minimum acceptable score on the required entrance exam in your area. Ask how the universities you are applying to will count your scores if you decide to take the required test more than once. Will they average them or will they take the highest score in one sitting? Research this information and plan ahead so that you have time to take the exam(s) again if you are not satisfied with your score the first time. Some tests average your score if you take them multiple times and other tests only have a limited number of times you can take the exam each year, so read registration materials carefully.

#### Registration Tips for Graduate Admissions Exams

*Directions on how to register for most graduate admissions exams can be found online through the sites linked above.*

- Make sure you check on dates and locations for these exams because you may need to register up to eight weeks prior to taking the exam.
- Keep in mind that each exam registration will cost you a substantial fee (actual fees can be determined on the associated websites above)
  - Make sure the date you register for is a date that you can definitely make, as rescheduling your test date can incur a penalty fee for some tests.
  - Keep in mind that you will want plenty of time to prepare for the exam in advance (using the resources below!) so that you do not have to pay to take it several times; NEVER go into a test and plan to just “wing” it – this will hurt your reputation and your wallet!
- Depending on the exam you take, it may also take 3-10 weeks for a hard-copy of your results to be delivered, so plan accordingly when putting your timeline together for application submissions.
- If you have financial need, it is possible to register for graduate entrance exams once at no cost. Check with [Marymount's Office of Financial Aid](#) for more information.

## Studying for Graduate Admissions Exams – Guiding Steps

*Setting the time aside to study for the exam(s) you are required to take for application to graduate school is critical. In fact, for some programs, how you do on the entrance exam can single-handedly determine the quality of the programs that choose to accept you as a student (this is typically the case with the LSAT score for Law School). In other words, don't take preparation for these exams lightly!*

### Step 1: Familiarize Yourself with Exam Structure/Content & Take a Practice Exam

After familiarizing yourself with the general format and content of the exam(s) you need to take by visiting the appropriate test maker's website, the **Center for Career Services strongly encourages students to take a full-length practice exam of their particular test before making any definitive plans on how they will approach their study plans**, as *where* you currently stand in terms of your performance will greatly influence *how* you will want to study and *what kind of materials/tutoring* you will want to invest in, if any at all.

- **To take a free, full-length practice exam:**
  - First, visit the test-maker website, as most will provide this feature on their site
  - If the test maker site does not work, log into the Reinsch Library database:
    - In addition to carrying several print resources for many graduate school entrance exams, the Reinsch Library also houses an online database called the Testing and Education Reference Center, which offers practice exams and some study guide materials for all of the above-mentioned tests. To access the database, you will need to log in using your Marymount ID and password and then search alphabetically under "T" in the databases section.
  - If Marymount's online database does not house a free practice test for your exam, consider visiting some of the private test prep companies listed below, as many of them will offer free, full-length exams.
  - Finally, at any point, do not forget that you can meet with a Career Coach, as they can help you find the right resource you need to access a free, full-length test.

### Step 2: Clarify Goals and Create a Study Plan

After taking the appropriate practice exam to see where you stand, clarify some goal statements for yourself based on how you would like to/need to improve on each part of the test to be considered for admission into your programs of interest. Use the average score of accepted applicants at your top choice school/program as a great benchmark to inform and guide your plan.

In terms of figuring when and how you will study, do a little research as to how many total hours the relevant test-maker and test-prep companies recommend students spend studying in preparation for your particular exam. Based on where you stand with your practice test performance and how much time stands between you and the test, sit down and create a realistic schedule for yourself as to when and how much time you will commit to studying so that you can keep yourself on track.

### Step 3: Take Advantage of Study Resources & Support Options

*Once you have a clear set of goals and a good sense of how much studying you will need to do between now and your test date, take advantage of some of the following resources as needed:*

#### FREE Resources

- Make use of the tutoring services in the [Center for Teaching and Learning here at Marymount](#), as you can be matched with a specific tutor to improve your skills in a particular area relevant to the test (like math, for example).
- Download free study guides and/or practice with online sample questions and test sections through the appropriate test maker website.

#### Additional Resources

- Purchase hard-copy test preparation materials from some of the private test preparation companies listed below at your local bookstore; depending on the test, these books average at about \$30/\$40 a piece and often include access to an online portion of test prep.

- Take an in-person or online exam review class with a private company (see a few recommended companies below).
  - The specific focus, intensity and length of these test prep courses can vary greatly, so do your research to see what option might be the best fit to invest in given your study goals and areas of weakness.
    - (e.g., if you just need a lot of help in math, perhaps you just need to sign up for a math focused course OR, if you need one-on-one support, you might want to sign up for individual tutoring sessions versus registering for a 10 week group course)

### **Graduate and Professional School Test Preparation Companies**

- Kaplan Educational Centers <http://www.kaplan.com>
- Knewton <http://www.knewton.com> Online GMAT and LSAT courses
- Lighthouse Review <http://www.lighthousereview.com>
- PowerScore <http://www.powerscore.com>
- Princeton Review <http://www.review.com>
- Testmasters LSAT Prep Courses <http://www.testmasters180.com>

### **Application Materials**

In addition to the official graduate school application, most schools request additional materials from each candidate. Some of the more commonly requested materials include:

#### **Official Transcripts**

Most institutions require an "official transcript" from Marymount, which comes in a sealed envelope and includes a list of classes taken, grades, GPA, dean's list honors (if applicable), and graduation date. Transcripts can be requested online, by fax, or in person. If you attended several colleges or universities prior to completing your degree at Marymount, you will need to submit a transcript from each college/university attended. Remember to allow processing time for your transcript requests! To request an official transcript from Marymount, visit the [Registrar's Office](#).

#### **Grade Point Average (GPA)**

The requirements for grade point averages vary from program to program. Most graduate programs prefer at least a 3.0-3.2 cumulative GPA. If you continue on in graduate school and apply to Ph.D. programs, they usually require approximately a 3.5 GPA in a Master's program. The GPAs listed here are only guidelines; extremely competitive programs will expect outstanding GPAs, so do your research as to what the schools/programs you are interested in are going to expect!

#### **Letters of Recommendation**

Most graduate or professional schools require three letters of recommendation. A faculty member in your department is usually regarded as the best reference, but letters from professionals in the field you are entering are also acceptable. Supervisors from internships and volunteer experiences are other good recommenders. Select people who can judge your past performance and character in a fair and accurate manner.

Contact those you think will give you a positive recommendation. Tell them your plans after getting the graduate degree and describe why you are interested in your chosen program and field. A copy of your personal statement and resume will give your recommenders the ability to tailor a recommendation for program. Tailored recommendations are more persuasive than "canned" recommendations. Remind the recommender of your accomplishments so they can cite specific examples.

If your application materials include forms for recommendations, give these to your recommenders along with stamped and addressed envelopes. Request that the recommendations be completed and mailed by a specific date. Check with them a couple days before, to verify that the person is on track. Note whether the schools want the recommendations

sent directly by the recommender or included with your application. Follow up with a thank you note – You never know when you may need their help again!

### **Portfolios or Interview**

Some disciplines require a portfolio of your work (e.g. graphic design, fashion design, teaching, etc.) to determine if your work shows potential and you have the necessary basic skills and knowledge that can be nurtured and developed during graduate study. You are encouraged to speak with professors in your area to learn more about preparing these items correctly and professionally. A graduate program may require you to travel for an interview, portfolio review, or a live audition. To prepare for an interview, call Career Services to schedule a mock interview well in advance.

### **Personal Statement**

Graduate and professional schools typically require applicants to submit some type of written statement as a part of the application process. This document is referred to as your “personal statement,” “letter of intent,” “personal narrative,” etc. The requirements for this document will vary according to the field and institution, but, in general, it will reflect on where you have been, what you hope to achieve by pursuing a graduate education, and how your experiences have prepared you for this experience.

Writing a quality personal statement requires time, thought and frequent revisions. Even more, it is important to get this part of the application out of the way early so that you can share it with your recommendation writers and use it to prepare for your interview, if needed. Therefore, get started early and have a variety of people give you feedback on your drafts, including the writing consultants in the [Center for Teaching and Learning here at Marymount](#). You may also call or email the Center for Career Services to set up an appointment with a Career Coach to discuss the personal statement writing process and get tips on how to develop the purpose, content, and style of your essay.

### **Supplemental Items**

Additional items may be required with the application. Note any audio, visual, or written samples of your work required to be submitted. If you have questions regarding appropriate submissions, speak with a contact person in the program. Do not assume. Check!

## **THE APPLICATION TIMELINE**

Timing is crucial when applying for graduate and professional school! The following timeline will help you plan the application process and keep track.

### **18 Months Before Enrollment / 9 Months Before Application Deadline**

- *Define your professional goals and determine what you should study*
- *Research programs and institutions of interest*
  - Contact experts in your field of interest, your undergraduate professors, and those who attended or are attending the schools and programs that interest you and set up an [informational interview](#). These individuals will help you learn what it is really like to do the type of work that you are interested in and what programs and degrees most appropriately relate to that field.
    - Jot down important points from your research to use later in writing your application.
    - Consider your statement of purpose and potential recommendation letter writers as you do this research.
  - From your research, decide what your specific area of concentration will be within your field
  - Visit potential schools if possible.
- *Request published materials from the schools you are considering such as graduate school catalogs, handbooks/bulletins, and admissions and financial aid applications.*
  - Pay close attention to admissions requirements, especially for those programs that differ from your undergraduate background.

- Note application deadlines on your calendar so that you give yourself enough time to gather all your materials and send them off in time (if not well before the deadline!).
- *Determine the type(s) of graduate admissions exam(s) you will need to take.*
  - Register for necessary exams keeping in mind how long the scoring process will take
  - Prepare for exams.
    - Take an initial practice test to measure your strengths and weaknesses.
    - Make use of FREE Marymount resources and consider alternative study support options as needed.
- *Start thinking about how you will finance your education.*
  - Save up for standardized testing and application fees.
  - Research graduate assistantships and/or fellowship opportunities in your field of study at your chosen school.
  - Look into scholarships and loan programs.
  - Keep a close eye on all required materials and deadlines.

### **12 Months Before Enrollment / 3 Months Before Application Deadline**

- *Continue your research into institutions and programs and finalize the list of schools to which you are applying.*
  - Draw up your own timeline of the application process and deadlines. Make sure you account for all factors, and stick to what you lay out for yourself.
  - Establish contacts with your potential schools.
    - Current students and department staff are typically happy to speak with prospective students. Although graduate faculty may be too busy to get back to many students, introducing yourself in a brief email could start a dialogue or, at the very least, get your name out to those who will eventually review your application.
  - Find out if your prospective schools have scheduled visits to your region, or if they are participating in grad school fairs nearby.
    - Go and visit the schools if they are not coming to your area.
    - Set up informational interviews with professors and financial aid officers.
- *Draft your statement of purpose and any other application essays.*
  - Focus on the information obtained from your school research in order to explain why this is a good fit for both you and the program.
  - Ask a writing consultant in the Center for Teaching and Learning, friends, colleagues, and your Career Coach in the Center for Career Services to give feedback and edits on early drafts.
- *Contact the people you would like to have write your recommendations. Tell them your current interests and future plans; ask them for advice on programs, schools, and career opportunities.*
  - Give your recommenders a deadline that is at least 3 weeks in advance of any application deadline to ensure the letters are mailed and processed in time.
  - Give them appropriate forms, a copy of your resume, the latest version of your personal statement, responses to specific questions from a school's application, and stamped-and-addressed envelopes.
    - Take the opportunity to refresh their memory of who you are and what you are interested in so that they can write the most meaningful letter!
- *Take your admissions exams.*
- *Request official transcripts.*
- *Fill out the application form.*
  - Pay close attention to instructions; not all applications are the same.
  - Find out if you can submit your application online. Many schools are opting for internet applications, which can reduce or eliminate application and postage fees.
  - Understand submission policies. Some schools require that transcripts and recommendation letters be sent directly from the institution/recommender. If so, those materials will be submitted separately from the rest of your application.

- *Continue to gather information on financial aid resources.*
  - Contact your potential schools for information on their own scholarships, teaching, and research assistantships.
  - Develop a list of funding opportunities for which you can apply, and keep track of due dates and deadlines.

### **11 Months Before Enrollment / 2 Months Before Application Deadline**

- *Finalize the writing components of your application*
  - Polish your application essays and tailor your personal statement for each school as necessary.
  - Have someone in the field, a writing consultant from the Center for Teaching and Learning, a Career Coach from Career Services, as well as a few good friends proofread it for you and make any final suggestions.
- *Complete all application forms.*
- *Develop a flow chart of what each school requires for the application process and check off each item as it is completed.*
- *Request official transcripts.*
- *Continue financial planning and submit any necessary financial aid forms/applications.*
- *Re-take necessary admissions exams if necessary.*
- *Conceptualize a contingency plan as back-up to going to grad school in the next year.*

### **9-10 months before enrollment / Submission of application**

- *Submit your applications.*
  - Pull together all required materials: application forms, transcripts, essays, test scores, and recommendations.
  - Submit your application at least two weeks in advance of the school's deadline; this will make your application stand out from the rest.
  - Keep two copies of every document for your records.
- *Follow up with each school to which you have applied.*
  - Confirm with all schools that your file is complete. Call well before the deadline to make sure that they have received all of your required materials in case you need to resubmit any documents.
- *Prepare financial statements for individual school applications.*
  - If you are following fall enrollment, the FAFSA deadline should be fast-approaching. Complete the form now so you can send it in as soon as possible after January 1 (which is when the application opens up for each year).
  - Continue to apply for financial aid and scholarships; keep all your application materials organized.

### **The Waiting Period (3-8 Months Before Enrollment)**

- The two months or so following your application submission can be difficult, as school response times may differ. If you have not heard back from a school seven days after the notification deadline, it is OK to follow up with the admissions staff and inquire about any alterations in their own timeline.
- As you hear from schools, take note of when each school that accepts you is going to require a response and navigate this process professionally.
- Try to take a break and come down from the stress of the past several months. You have a lot of work ahead of you with grad school, so think of this time as your summer vacation and take advantage of it best you can.
- Finish outlining your contingency plan in case you are not accepted by your target grad school(s).

### **Making Your Decision (2-5 Months Before Enrollment)**

- Compare the offers you receive and understand that many different aspects will fall into consideration. Ranking? Cost? Duration? Personal preferences?
- Look into appealing your aid package if the amount of money offered to you does not meet your needs.

- Look into alternative loan programs if your final aid package still does not meet your needs.
- Notify all admissions offices of your decision.
- Start looking into housing opportunities if the school you will be attending is not local.
- Send thank you notes to those who wrote your letters of recommendation and anyone else that assisted you along the way. Inform them of your plans. This keeps the door open for future communications as well as future references.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES REGARDING GRADUATE SCHOOL AT THE CENTER FOR CAREER SERVICES**

In addition to the information this e-guide offers, the Center for Career Services also provides the following services and materials to support you through the graduate school decision-making and application process. Our staff strongly encourages ALL students and alumni to take advantage of these FREE resources!

- **Individual Career Appointments**
  - Unsure of what direction you want to head? Feeling overwhelmed with the graduate school application process? Talk through your options with an experienced Career Coach who will sit down with you and help you design a personally meaningful action plan.
  - Students and alumni can schedule an appointment with a Career Coach by calling 703-284-5960. If you are not able to come in, we are happy to arrange a phone appointment as an alternative – just let us know you are interested in this option when you call!
  - When scheduling an appointment, the more specific information you can provide in terms of what type of graduate school options you are considering and what your academic and work background is, the better our Career Coaches can tailor their support during the appointment.
- **Career Services Workshops & Events**
  - Our office hosts a variety of workshops throughout the academic year, several of which focus on the graduate school decision making process as it relates to specific types of industries. [For an up-to-date list of upcoming workshops and events, visit our website.](#)
  - If you are a student and would like to request a workshop or presentation that focuses on graduate school for an organization or club that you are a part of on campus, please email [career.services@marymount.edu](mailto:career.services@marymount.edu) with your name, club/organization, and potential dates and times for your workshop and we will follow up with you!
- **Print Resources on Interviewing**
  - The Center for Career Services has a library of career resource books in the lobby of our main office in Rowley, Suite 1005 that students can check out for a period of two weeks.
  - For a full list of our print resources, including those specific to graduate school check out [this document](#).
  - We also encourage students to take advantage of the [many print and online resources available through the Reinsch Library](#), including test preparation materials for various types of graduate/professional school exams.