

Graduate School: Frequently Asked Questions

At Rice, a majority of students consider attending graduate or professional school. Often they seek to gain additional knowledge in a field of interest, expand career opportunities and increase earning potential, or work closely with experts in a particular discipline. In fact, in response to the 2012 Senior Exit Survey, 36% of Rice graduating seniors indicated that they would attend graduate or professional school immediately after graduation. Another 47% indicated that they would pursue advanced study at some point in their future.

Before making the decision to attend graduate school, carefully reflect on your reasons for continuing your education. Weigh the time commitment, financial considerations, personal adjustments and sacrifices, and readiness to pursue graduate level work. Assess the value of a graduate degree in terms of earning potential, entry into a profession, advancement and competitiveness. Seek guidance from faculty, alumni and other professionals in the field, academic and career advisors, and current graduate students.

Consider the following:

- How long will it take to complete the degree?
- How much will the degree cost?
- For whom are you doing this?
- How motivated are you right now?
- With your current experience, will you be considered a competitive applicant?
- What can the degree do for you?
- What can you offer the program?

Ultimately, enrollment in graduate school should be your decision, based on an academic interest in a particular subject area, the need for specialized training and education for professional advancement, and/or a desire for personal enrichment. Delaying a job search, avoiding decisions about the future, or succumbing to pressure from peers or family are not optimal foundations for advanced study.

DEGREE OPTIONS

***Question:** What is the difference between the types of degrees I could earn?*

There are a great variety of programs for graduate study. Each offers specialized training for particular career goals. Degrees may be considered either academic or professional in nature. Academic Degrees (M.A., M.S., Ph.D.) involve acquiring and communicating new knowledge through original research and are awarded in virtually all liberal arts disciplines. Professional Degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills and may be acquired in many areas such as business (M.B.A.), education (M.Ed., Ed.D.), engineering (M.Eng.), fine arts (M.F.A.), law (J.D.), and medicine (M.D.).

Before you can choose an appropriate graduate school program, you will need to decide what kind of career you eventually want to have. Faculty members, career advisors, alumni, and professionals in the field can help you explore what career options are available to someone with a particular advanced degree.

Question: *Which discipline should I pursue?*

Graduate programs that grant the same degree still differ by the specific range of sub-disciplines in which they offer training. Choosing the right discipline in which to apply requires a considerable amount of reflection on your interests and academic/non-academic experiences.

Consider the following:

- What classes have interested you? What projects have interested you? Why?
- What are your skills and strengths?
- What are you curious about? What questions or problems would you like to investigate?
- Are you more inclined toward theory, experimentation, or application?
- Are you concerned with micro- or macro- level processes?
- Do you like learning languages (including mathematical)?
- Are you interested in a particular region or time period? What about it appeals to you?
- What really does not appeal to you? Why do you think so?

Question: *What are good sources for investigating my options and choosing schools to apply to?*

One of the most important aspects of applying to graduate school is selecting the programs that are best suited to your interests and career goals. Consult professors or other mentors who have specialized in the discipline of your choice. Faculty members are excellent sources of information about graduate programs in their specialties and the strengths and weaknesses of programs at various universities. Review professional journals to learn where faculty are doing work that interests you. Research people you admire in your field to see where they attended graduate school.

Lists and rankings are published online at the following websites:

- Peterson's Graduate School Guides <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>
- Princeton Review <http://www.princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx>
- U.S. News & World Reports Best Graduate Schools
<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>
- Council on Undergraduate Research's Registry of Undergraduate Researchers and Graduate Schools http://www.cur.org/projects_and_services/registry/default.aspx
- GradSchools.com <http://www.gradschools.com/>
- Graduate Guide <http://www.graduateguide.com/>
- PhDs.org Graduate School Rankings <http://graduate-school.phds.org/rankings>

Question: *How can a graduate school fair help me explore my options and how should I prepare for one?*

Graduate school fairs provide you with an opportunity to gain in-depth information from school representatives that will help you evaluate programs and find the best fit for you. Before the fair, research which schools will be in attendance. Then, begin reviewing graduate school catalogs, directories, and websites to get a sense of the universities and their programs. This will help you identify some of the programs of interest to you and which schools to target at the fair. Prepare a list of questions to help you determine if there is a match between the graduate school program and your interests and goals. Questions may address costs, financial aid, program requirements, course offerings, facilities, location, student life, faculty, and program reputation.

Arrive early and take a few minutes to review the map and directory of the fair. Visit the schools you are most interested in first so that you have plenty of time to gather as much information as you need. Be prepared to answer questions from the admissions representatives such as, “Why do you want to attend graduate school?” and, “When?” Ask the representative for his/her card. This will provide you with a direct contact for asking follow up questions. Use this opportunity to not only network with the representatives, but also to collect materials for later review.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Question: Will I need to take a standardized admissions test?

Most schools require applicants to take a standardized test as part of the application process. There are several examinations utilized in graduate school admissions. Ask the programs you are interested in what exam scores are accepted and what the typical range of scores is for admitted students.

- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) – For academic graduate study, the examination required is usually the GRE General Test. The General Test contains verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing sections. Some programs may also require the Subject Test. The Subject Test measures basic knowledge of terminology and concepts in a particular discipline. <http://www.ets.org/gre>
- Miller Analogies Test (MAT) – The MAT uses verbal analogies to test reasoning ability. Some graduate schools will accept the MAT in lieu of the GRE. www.milleranalogies.com/
- Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) – The GMAT is required for most students seeking an M.B.A. degree. The test measures verbal, mathematical, and analytical writing skills. It does not test specific knowledge in a particular subject area. <http://www.mba.com/the-gmat.aspx>

Question: When should I take a standardized admissions test?

Most general standardized admissions tests are offered year round at controlled testing centers. Other specialized subject tests are offered less frequently. Because the scores are valid over several years, typically five, you can take these exams when you feel most prepared. Many students, even if postponing graduate studies, will elect to take the exams while still undergraduates. Whenever you elect to take the requisite exam, make sure your testing date is early enough to allow your scores to be reported before schools’ application deadlines.

Question: How do I study for a standardized admissions test?

Plan to give yourself plenty of time to study. Taking released or sample tests produced by the test makers is probably the best way to prepare. Work through the examples and explanations carefully, and then take the sample tests under simulated test conditions by observing time limits. Commercial test preparation courses are available, but may vary in cost and quality. It will be important to investigate the courses carefully. Commercial courses can help build confidence, motivate test takers to prepare, and provide a structured program of study.



ADMISSIONS

Question: *What are the qualities considered in my application to graduate school?*

Graduate schools are looking for diverse, thoughtful, well-prepared, ambitious, and mature candidates who stand out in the applicant pool. Most application materials can be found on an institution's website. Read the directions carefully. Pay special attention to deadlines for test scores, application materials (forms, transcripts, curriculum vitae, essays, writing sample), recommendation letters, and financial aid applications. Submitting your materials early can only help your case for admission, especially if schools operate on rolling admissions. Additionally, all application materials are not always sent to the same office. Stay organized by creating spreadsheets or other tracking methods to ensure you do not neglect any application details.

Question: *What are the academic requirements for graduate school?*

Strong undergraduate academic preparation is essential for admission and ultimately success in graduate school. Key skills for success include critical thinking, analytical abilities, written and oral communication, time management, self-motivation, and self-discipline. Graduate schools require a strong undergraduate GPA and will ask you to submit transcripts from all post-secondary institutions you have attended with your application. Be sure to investigate any specific prerequisite courses required for admission.

Question: *In addition to performing well in my courses, what other activities should I engage in during semesters and summer breaks?*

Graduate schools will look for demonstrated interest in the field you are planning to study. Research, job, internship, or volunteer experience in the field will help you build a competitive application. Active participation in relevant student organizations can also demonstrate your interest in the field. Like a resume, your curriculum vitae (CV) should clearly summarize your academic background as well as teaching and research experience, publications, presentations, awards, honors, affiliations and other co-curricular activities. Unlike a resume, a CV need not be constrained to two pages or less.

Question: *What is a personal statement?*

The personal statement is your opportunity to present yourself and why you would be an asset to the graduate program, differentiating yourself from other applicants with similar scores. It is an opportunity to discuss your background and articulate why you want to go to graduate school. It can address your goals, your commitment to the field of study, and can highlight any relevant experiences. However, your curriculum vitae alone will reflect what you have done and recognition you have received. Your personal statement should emphasize learning and growth.

Your essay should demonstrate your understanding of the central concerns of the field of study or profession to which you are applying. Discuss your passion for future graduate work on those topics and how you see yourself fitting into their program. This will require tailoring your essay to each individual program. However, avoid trying to appeal to a particular audience or writing what you think they want to read. Allow your readers to gain a genuine understanding of your interests, strengths, and compatibility with their program.



The personal statement also serves as an indication of your writing ability. As the essay is a short piece, it is crucial that you organize your thoughts and then refine, simplify, and polish your ideas. You should plan on writing and revising several drafts. Be certain that your final essay is neat, grammatically correct, and devoid of any errors.

Question: *How should I choose a writing sample?*

Select a paper that you think represents your skills in the field, your talents as a writer, and the way in which you think about problems/texts. If you can improve the piece, either argumentatively, rhetorically, or formally, take the time to do so. If you must edit a longer paper to fit the guidelines for submission, be sure to revise the paper's content accordingly and make the introductions, transitions, and conclusions work for the new version.

Question: *How do I request letters of recommendation?*

In letters of recommendation, admissions committees look for information not provided elsewhere in the application. The ideal letter writer is someone who can describe your academic strengths and personal qualities positively and in some detail. Be aware that a highly known person is not always the best recommendation writer. It is more important that the writer know you well. Request letters of recommendation in person, and be sure to ask the potential letter writer if they are willing to write a favorable letter for you.

In order to garner the best possible letter of recommendation, it is advised that you provide the letter writers with the following information:

- Deadlines for application and any specific instructions necessary to complete the letter of recommendation
- A statement about what you are applying for and why (or your personal statement)
- A summary of what you learned from your experience with the letter writer
- Your curriculum vitae
- A copy of your transcript

It is your responsibility to ensure that your application is completed on time, therefore, ask for letters of recommendation early and ask nicely. The earlier you ask, the more time you provide the letter writer to write a stellar recommendation. Given the number of students, past and present, who may be seeking a professor's recommendation, it is always good to courteously follow-up with your letter writers to ensure that your letter has been submitted. Always write a thank you note to those who serve as recommenders.

Question: *Will I be asked to interview for graduate school?*

Interviews are occasionally required and are often useful, both to obtain further information about programs and to present your strengths. Before the visit, read the website, catalog, and any other brochures the department supplies and review faculty interests. You will make a better impression if you have done your research in advance and can ask thoughtful questions about the school and the program. A visit is always helpful even if an interview is not required.

Common interview questions:

- Why do you want a graduate degree?
- What other schools did you apply to?



- Why do you think this program is a good fit for you?
- Tell us about (something that you wrote about in your personal statement or included in your CV).
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student?

Question: What if I am not ready to apply by the time I graduate?

Many students consider graduate school, but may not want to attend immediately after completing their undergraduate degree. Taking some time off may provide time for reflection and clearer decision-making for your future. Graduate schools, especially professional programs, expect you to have clearly defined interests and relevant experiences leading to an area of specialization. There are, of course, some programs that seek applicants coming right out of undergraduate school. Some schools will admit you and then allow you to defer entrance for a year or two. It is important to research this carefully to determine the best time to apply. If you decide to take time off, remember to develop a plan that complements your long-term goals.

Consider the following:

- Would one or more relevant experiences enhance your applications for graduate school?
- Do you need to complete introductory or prerequisite courses for your proposed studies?
- Are there any financial, personal, or employment obligations that must be fulfilled first?
- Do you need a break before embarking on a concentrated period of study?
- Does the year following graduation look like a great time for travel, making a contribution through service experience, or something else you would like to do?
- Do you feel like you need time to figure out what you really want to do and gain some additional perspective on your life goals?

Question: How do I finance graduate school?

Graduate students fund their education in a variety of ways. Financial aid is often based on a combination of merit and financial need. Note that financial aid deadlines may be earlier than your program application deadlines. Check with both the financial aid office and the graduate program department.

Need-based aid determines financial need by calculating the difference between total educational costs and the student's financial resources. Need-based financial aid includes work-study programs, private, federal and state loans, grants and fellowships, and tuition remission programs offered to employees by their employers, or to students by the professional or graduate school. In order to be eligible for federal aid, you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Merit-based aid is awarded on the basis of academic achievement, talent, or promise. Forms of merit-based aid include assistantships, grants, and fellowships. Assistantships are usually awarded in the form of teaching, research, or graduate assignments. Early contact with the graduate program department is critical in obtaining assistantships. Grants are sums of money awarded for specific activities on a project basis. The funding may come from a variety of sources, including government agencies, corporations, or foundations. Fellowships are a prestigious and competitive form of financial assistance. Winning a postgraduate fellowship is a mark of achievement and an honor that can open many other doors. Fellowships may facilitate study with great scholars and lead to new networks of contacts and colleagues. They are worth the time and effort required for their pursuit.