

Alfred University

McComsey Career Development Center

CHOOSING A GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

Choosing a Specialization and Researching Academic Programs:

Why do you want to go to graduate or professional school? This first and most important question will determine everything else about your search. Before you look at schools or programs, you need to answer that question for yourself. Admissions committees will be much more impressed if you can clearly express your research interests and reasons for wanting a graduate degree. Here's what you can do to get started:

- 1. Talk with a counselor in the CDC and your faculty members.** We can assist you in identifying programs that match your interests, or even help you to identify what your interests might be. You may also need our help in finding quality information among everything that's out there. **The CDC cannot tell you which schools are the best schools for you! If you have a very specific academic interest, we can let you know which schools offer it but you should also work with your faculty for their recommendations. They have seen you in the classroom – we haven't.
- 2. Graduate School Directories.** If you're ready to begin your research, you may wish to start with the Peterson's directories in our library and the Choices database in the computer lab. Both allow you to search on parameters such as location, program, tuition, and other factors. It's a good place to start building your list of possibilities. ART STUDENTS – you should begin with “MFA Programs in the Visual Arts” and/or “MA/PhD Programs in Art and Art History” in our library. Just ask where they are located.
- 3. The Internet.** In seeking the right match for you, the internet will be indispensable. You can use it in several ways, including:
 - Performing searches on sites such as <http://www.petersons.com> and <http://www.gradschools.com>.
 - Checking graduate school rankings on U.S. News Colleges and Careers, at <http://www.usnews.com>.
 - Research specific schools by going directly to that college's website (for example, if you're interested in Rhode Island School of Design, try entering that into a search engine. From there, you can usually read about each specific program and degree.)
 - Apply online. Many schools encourage you to submit your application electronically and may even waive the application fee for online applicants.

How do you find out which schools are “the best” for your academic program?

There are a lot of factors you'll need to consider in choosing your school – some related to academics and some completely unrelated. Here are some of the things you'll want to research, or use to narrow your list:

Very basic things you should decide:

- Master's, Doctorate, or professional degree...and why?
- What are the career opportunities with the degree you want?

Tuition

- What percentage of graduate students receives financial assistance? (The number is probably higher than you think).
- Are research/teaching assistantships available?
- *Is the institution public or private?*

Courses of Study/Faculty

- What are the course descriptions?
- What are some of the research projects of the faculty?
- What is the student-to-faculty ratio?
- Are there any specific faculty you'd like to study with?

Reputation

- What do your faculty members think of the university/program?
- What are the published ratings? (See U.S. News and College Report, or ask a counselor for ideas on how to find this out)
- *What's the average GRE (or LSAT, GMAT, etc.) score of accepted students?*

Other Factors

- Geographically, where do you prefer to go to school?
- Can you defer admission for a year if you need/want to?
- Is it a full-time program, or does it allow part time students? (You never know what else life is going to throw your way.)
- Is there access to cultural events, sports, transportation, shopping, and social opportunities?
- How large or small of a town do you want to live in?
- If it's a large city, what's the public transportation system like?
- How large or small of a student body are you comfortable with?

The Timeline

The majority of fall semester deadlines are between January and April. Some professional schools such as medical or law school may have deadlines as early as a year prior to matriculation. Still others have "rolling deadlines" - they'll accept candidates as they receive applications. Here's a timeline you can use if you're planning to go directly on to graduate or professional school.

Junior Year, Spring Semester

- Come to the CDC to start your search, if you haven't already.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests.
- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs.
- Talk to advisors about application requirements.
- Investigate national scholarships.
- Open a credential file with the CDC; begin asking professors for letters of recommendation targeted toward graduate school.
- If you're considering medical, veterinary or dental school, you will need to see Dr. Brad Bowden, the chair of the pre-med committee on campus.

Summer between Junior and Senior Years

- Study and register for the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, or whatever test you need.
- Come up with a list of at least five potential grad school choices - include a few "safety schools", a few schools that are reasonably competitive, and a couple of ambitious choices.
- Start sending out for catalogs. Almost all grad schools will have online forms through which you can request information at no charge.
- Continue to gather letters of recommendation.

Senior Year, Fall Semester

- Take required graduate admissions tests. You may want to call 1-800-KAP-TEST to schedule a free practice exam, administered by Kaplan Educational Resources.

- Write or call for application materials.
- Visit institutions of interest.
- Write application essays.
- Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.
- Send in completed applications.

Senior Year, Spring Semester

- Register for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service (GAPSFAS) or the Financial Aid Form (FAF) if required.
- Check with all institutions before their deadlines to be sure your file is complete.
- Visit institutions that accept you.
- Send a deposit to the institution you choose.
- Notify other colleges that accepted you of your decision so they can admit students on their waiting lists.
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote recommendation letters or assisted you in other ways, informing them of your success.
- Donate your old catalogs to the CDC.

Graduate Admissions Tests

Many programs require one or more standardized admissions tests. Here are the most common tests:

Graduate Record Examination (GRE): The test that is most widely used by graduate schools is the GRE. It consists of two parts, the general section and the subject section. Many schools require the general section but not a subject section. Not all schools require GRE scores - be sure to check the requirements of the graduate school that you are interested in to see which parts of the GRE are required. The GRE Bulletin, with additional information and registration forms, and the General Test Descriptive Booklet, are available at the Career Development Center. You may also obtain information and register on-line at <http://www.gre.org>.

The General Test is administered only by computer and is not currently available at Alfred, however there are more than 250 test centers nationwide, including Buffalo, Rochester and Ithaca. The Subject Tests are administered through a paper-and-pencil test. Only one Subject Test can be taken on any one test date. There are tests available in sixteen areas: Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, Education, Engineering, Geology, History, Literature in English, Mathematics, Music, Physics, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology. Subject tests are given at Alfred in November, December, and April. The fees for both the General and Subject tests are around \$100.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT): If you're thinking of law school, you should plan to take the LSAT. We offer it seven times on campus, in June, October, December and February. This half-day test consists of four types of questions: analytical reasoning, logical reasoning, reading comprehension, and a writing sample. For more information pick up a bulletin and application at the CDC or check the website at <http://www.lsac.org>.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT): This test, which costs \$125, is required for admittance into most business schools. The GMAT is offered only in a computer-adaptive version, which we do not have at Alfred. For more information, pick up the bulletin at the CDC or check <http://www.gmat.org>.

Miller Analogies Test (MAT): The MAT requires the solution of 100 problems stated in the form of analogies. Some graduate school art programs require this as part of their admissions process. This test is not offered at Alfred. Booklets for the MAT are available in the Career Development Center.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): This test is used by medical schools. This test is not administered at Alfred, but information about the MCAT and registration materials can be obtained at the CDC.

Other tests for which we have application and information booklets include the Praxis Series, the NSTEs, Veterinary College Admission Test (VCAT), Dental Admission Test (DAT), Allied Health Professions Admission Test (AHPAT) and several others.

The Application

The Transcript: Admissions committees require official transcripts of your grades. To send a copy of your transcript to a graduate school, you need to contact the Registrar's Office - go to http://www.alfred.edu/alumni/transcript_request.html for information. According to Federal law, the Registrar's Office is the only office on campus that can forward your transcript to a graduate school or company. In addition, you must make the request personally and in writing; a school cannot request them for you. Be sure to request your transcripts well before the application deadline.

Letters of Recommendation: Most graduate schools require 2-3 letters of recommendation. Letters from your current faculty will carry the most weight with graduate admissions committees. Be sure to ask your references if they think they know you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Be aware that the earlier in the semester that you ask, the less busy faculty will be. It is a courtesy to provide them with addressed, stamped envelopes for their convenience - DO NOT ask them to send the letters directly to you to forward. In addition, giving your professors such documents as transcripts, a resume, a copy of your application essay, and a copy of a research paper may help them write a thorough recommendation. Most grad schools will expect you to have waived your of access to recommendation letters. *Pick up our handout on Letters of Recommendation for more specific ideas.*

The Career Development Center will hold your references in a Credential File. We will mail them at your *written* request (email, fax, in person, or postal mail) to the graduate schools to which you are applying. This file will be maintained for ten years after graduation, unless you continue to use your file on an active basis. There is no cost to you while you are a current student or for the first ten (10) mailings, or for one year after graduation. After that, there is a \$3.00 fee per address. For information, contact Peggy Broderick at the CDC (x2164) or see our website (www.alfred.edu/cdc) to download the forms you need to start your file.

The Personal Statement: Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult and time-consuming part of the application process. Your aim should be a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of what you want to do, and showing your enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen. Your essay should reflect your writing ability and reveal the clarity, depth, and focus of your thinking.

Admissions committees will assess a number of variables from your statement, including: your motivation and commitment to the field of study; writing ability; realistic expectations of the program and resulting career opportunities; major areas of interest within the field; research or work experience; educational background (formal and informal); short and long-term goals; reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field, at a particular institution; maturity; and personal uniqueness - what you would add to the diversity of the entering class.

Questions to ask yourself as you begin to structure the personal statement:

- What sets you apart from other applicants? Why may you be a stronger candidate for graduate study - and more successful and effective in your chosen field - than other applicants?
- What factors or events have contributed to your development into the person you are today?
- What is special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about your and your life story? What are some experiences - academic, personal or work-oriented - that would help the committee gather further information about you?
- When did you originally become interested in the field, and what have you learned since that time that have strengthened your resolve?

- What are your specific career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that need explanation?
- Have there been any unusual obstacles you've had to overcome to get to where you are now?
- What personal characteristics do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in your profession? How have you demonstrated this characteristic in the past?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Other general suggestions:

- Creative opening sentences are great IF you can find something unique and if you stick with the theme throughout your essay.
- Back up your claims with solid examples of when you have demonstrated the skill or competency you're describing.
- The number one mistake people make in writing personal statements is not proofing the names of the universities! For example "For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to get my degree from Duke University."....except that you're writing to Princeton.
- Do not address information that might reflect badly on you such as poor grades or a low GRE score in your essay. Keep it positive and inspired. Address these other issues in an addendum to your application or in a cover letter that you will enclose. Your explanation should be short and to the point, avoiding long, tedious excuses.

The CDC has several books on writing application essays that you might want to look at before starting. We strongly recommend that you have your letters reviewed by a counselor at the CDC, the Writing Center, AND at least one faculty member. We'll all be assessing different qualities of your essay and will be able to give you a wide range of feedback.

The Interview, Portfolio and/or Audition: Interviews are required in some fields and highly encouraged in most others. They can be a very important opportunity to persuade an institution's admissions office that you would be an excellent candidate. Portfolios and auditions are often required for creative disciplines and can be the most important part of the application procedure. Be sure to prepare by arranging for a mock interview with the Career Development Center, or speaking with your faculty members about putting together the best portfolio or preparing for an audition. Many websites, such as www.interviewfeedback.com have "insider guides" to graduate and professional school interviews.

Mailing the completed application: Be sure to mail everything well before the deadline and call to confirm that it got there; a late application can ruin your chances regardless of whose fault it is. Package it up nicely and don't fold several sheets of paper into a small business envelope. If you can afford it, send it certified mail so that you'll know when the application has been received. Graduate schools generally require an application fee.

Financing Your Graduate Study

There are many types of aid provided for graduate study. *You should never rule out a school as too expensive until you learn more about the types of aid generally received by its students.* Federal aid is available to many U.S. citizens, nationals, or permanent residents. In order to qualify, all applicants must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For the purposes of most federal student aid, graduate students are automatically considered independent. Keep in mind, however, that some schools require parental information and expect a contribution from parents who are able to provide, even if you are an independent student.

General Application Tips

- Types and amounts of aid will vary tremendously by school.
- Apply to as many sources as you can find.
- Make sure you have all the forms required by each school.
- Complete all forms legibly and accurately. Check your applications carefully, as errors and omissions can often cause problems.
- Keep copies of all forms.

- Apply for aid every year if you need it.
- If you have special circumstances, communicate them directly to the financial aid officer.
- Be aware that changes in your financial aid package may occur each year - it is up to you to find out if that happens.
- Send in your application well before the deadline.

Types of Aid

Grants and Fellowships - generally, these are awards that do not require repayment. They may be based solely on academic merit (fellowships/scholarships), or awarded based on need (grants). Many include tuition and stipends for living expenses. [A database of fellowship sources is available on the CDC website under the Student section.](#) Sources include:

1. *Federal Support* - several federal agencies fund fellowship and trainee programs for US citizens and nationals. A few samples of these programs include:

- National Science Foundation which supports three years of graduate study in engineering, mathematics, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the history and philosophy of science. Call 615-241-4300 for an application.
- Jacob Jarvits Fellowship supports students in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Call 202-260-3574 for more information.
- National Institute of Health sponsors many different fellowship opportunities. Applications are available by calling 301-594-7248.

2. *State Support* -those with the biggest programs in the past have been California, Michigan, New York, Oklahoma and Texas. In most cases, you need to be a legal resident of that state for at least 12 months. Many state budgets have been cut in recent years, so contact your state scholarship office for more information.

3. *Institutional Aid* -Educational institutions using their own funds provide between \$2 and \$3 billion in graduate assistance in the form of fellowships, tuition waivers and assistantships. Consult school catalogs for information about aid programs.

4. *Aid from Foundations* -most foundations provide support in areas of interest to them. Try an Internet search or ask a counselor at the CDC to help you find sources through the Choices program.

Work Programs - certain types of support, such as research, teaching, and administrative assistantships require recipients to provide services to the university in exchange for salary or stipend. Sometimes tuition is also provided or waived.

1. *Teaching Assistantships* - generally require about 20 hours per week that may involve delivering lectures, correcting classwork, grading papers, counseling students, and supervising laboratory groups. If you are interested in a TA position, contact the academic department. Ordinarily you are not considered for such positions until the school has accepted you.

2. *Research Assistantships* -These assistantships usually require you to assist in the research endeavors of a faculty member. They are rarely offered to first year students. Contact the academic department to discuss your individual research experience and interest.

3. *Administrative Assistantships* -these positions usually require 15-20 hours of work each week in an administrative office of the university and are available to majors in education, humanities, etc. Check the school catalog for details about these types of programs.

Loans -There are several different federal loan programs available to you. Each loan program has a different maximum amount you can borrow, different requirements for eligibility, different interest rates and different repayment options. In addition to federal loans, there are many loan programs available to specific groups such as

medical students, law students and MBAs. General information detailing some of these programs can be found in *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Schools: An Overview*, 1999, which is available at the Career Development Center. The Financial Aid office of the school you are applying to should also be able to provide you with additional information.

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