

PEPPERDINE | Seaver College

# Career Center

## Applying to Graduate School Guide

**Pepperdine University**

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## Applying to Graduate School FAQs

### **What is graduate school?**

A graduate school is an advanced degree program that allows students to specialize in a particular subject area. At the end of the program, students graduate with a Master's or doctoral degree, depending on the program selected.

### **Why should I attend graduate school?**

There are a variety of reasons to attend graduate school. For example, graduate school provides students with the opportunity to gain expertise in a particular field, make lasting friendships and connections with classmates and professors, earn a higher salary, gain eligibility for different career opportunities and career advancement, and conduct research, to name a few.

### **Why should I not attend graduate school?**

Graduate school is no small commitment, requiring many hours of classes, outside study, research, and experiential learning requirements. It can also be expensive. For instance, graduate school tuition is often more expensive than undergraduate tuition, and graduate school programs typically give out less financial aid. Furthermore, it can take a lot of time. Most Masters programs are two years, Juris Doctor (or J.D., the degree conferred to law school graduates) programs are typically three years, Ph.D. programs are five to seven years, and medical school is typically four years of study plus at least three years of residency.

### **How many schools should I apply to?**

We recommend that students apply to several schools, including “reach,” “middle-of-the-pack” and “safety” schools. At the same time, students should also keep in mind the cost of applying to each school, which includes fees upon application and for standardized tests, along with sending test score reports and other materials. While the ideal number of schools will vary from person to person, a manageable range is between five to ten schools. One exception to this is medical school applications. For medical school applications, it is not uncommon for applicants to apply to many more schools; in some cases, applicants will apply to upwards of twenty schools.

## Common Misconceptions About Graduate School

### **Graduate schools do not provide scholarships.**

False! While there is often not as much financial aid for graduate students, many schools still have some scholarship funds for graduate students. Students are also eligible for outside scholarships, grants, teaching assistantships, graduate assistantships, and fellowships. See page 24 for more information.

### **Graduate school is only for [insert group here].**

False! Anyone with a college degree can consider graduate school. The best programs are geographically, ethnically, racially, religiously, and otherwise diverse, bringing many perspectives to the classroom and encouraging students to broaden their horizons.

### **Graduate school rankings are the same as undergraduate school rankings.**

False! Many institutions have different rankings for their specific graduate programs. It is important to do your research to learn each program's specialties in order to identify the right fit for you.

### **I am not prepared for graduate school.**

False! Pepperdine's liberal arts education provides students with a comprehensive education that will make you a strong candidate for graduate study. At the same time, reference each program's admission requirements to ensure that you have taken the necessary coursework and have the right amount of work experience necessary.

### **Graduate school is just like college all over again.**

False! While there are some similarities between graduate school and an undergraduate education, there are some important differences. Generally, in graduate school, classes will be smaller, there is more of an emphasis on research, there are fewer small assignments, there is more of an academic focus, and the classes are more specialized. In addition, there tends to be less of a focus on having fun and more of an emphasis on learning.

### **I did not major in the field that I am hoping to pursue in graduate school, so I am unqualified to apply.**

False! Generally, graduate schools will accept students from a variety of majors, though some programs may give preference to students with certain majors. While some programs require pre-requisite courses, applicants from a variety of academic backgrounds are typically considered.

## Questions for Self-Exploration

In deciding whether or not to apply for graduate school, consider its impact on your career, your motivation for applying, your financial situation, and the timing of your decision.

### Career Questions:

1. What can I do with my undergraduate degree?
2. Besides graduate school, what other ways could I continue learning?
3. What career do I want to pursue?
4. How do I know that this is a strong career match for me? Have I participated in job shadows, informational interviews, and/or internships in my career of choice to get a sense for the role?
5. Is a graduate degree a requirement for my intended career? Will a graduate degree make employment easier in my career of choice? Alternatively, will a graduate degree make me overqualified for a career, thus making my search more difficult?
6. What are my short and long-term career goals? Does attending graduate school help me achieve these goals? If so, how?

### Motivation Questions:

7. Who wants me to go to graduate school?
8. How have my family members, friends, and professors influenced my decision to apply to graduate school?
9. What is motivating me to apply to graduate school?

### Time Questions:

10. Will the time and monetary investment I make for graduate school repay me in the money and experience I earn throughout my life?
11. Is now the right time for me to attend graduate school?
12. Am I ready to commit to at least one more year of exams, homework, research, papers, and/or group projects?

### Financial Questions:

13. Am I financially able to attend graduate school?

### Learning Questions:

14. Are there other options available to you for continued learning in your field of choice? For instance, could you gain marketable skills through professional seminars, workshops, mass open online courses (such as those offered on websites like Coursera or edX), or a training certificate?

## Factors to Consider When Evaluating Graduate Schools

Now that you have decided to apply for graduate school, how do you know what schools to apply to? The number of graduate schools and programs can be overwhelming. Fortunately, there are several ways to narrow down your list to a manageable number of schools. Consider the “GO SO FAR” method in order to determine what programs are right for you.

**G: Geographic Area and surrounding community**

**O: Overall Cost of program and availability of financial aid**

**S: Specific Characteristics of each program**

**O: Overall “Fit” with your career interests and goals**

**F: Faculty that specialize in your area of interest**

**A: Accreditation**

**R: Reputation of the program**

**Geographic Area:** A school’s location is often downplayed, but it can actually have a significant impact on your overall graduate school experience. Having been a Pepperdine student, you know that watching sunset over the ocean can have a big boost on your mood in the midst of the stressful finals season. Outside of class, you will likely be spending your free time studying in local coffee shops and exploring the surrounding area. While you will not have quite as much free time as you did as an undergraduate student, you will still be living in that place for a significant period of time depending on the program’s length. Ask yourself, is this a place that you would be happy living in for at least one year? In addition, geographic area is important when considering where you want to end up after graduating. Schools tend to have their strongest connections in the surrounding community. In addition, if you choose to intern or work in the area while in school, then you will be establishing connections in that area as well. With that in mind, you may want to choose a school that is located near a city to have a greater number of internship and job opportunities during your program and after graduation.

**Overall Cost:** What is the total cost of program? You should be able to find this figure on the school’s website. How available is financial aid at this institution? Applying to schools that are generous with their financial aid can help you graduate debt-free. Timing also plays into this. Some schools have multiple deadlines, with early applicants receiving priority when it comes to financial aid.

**Specific Characteristics:** Each program has specific characteristics that make it unique. This is important because you can choose a school based on these characteristics. Research special opportunities that programs offer, such as study abroad, community service, clinics, research, and experiential learning opportunities to learn more about the specific characteristics.

**Overall “Fit”:** Apply to schools that are a strong cultural and career fit. Ask yourself, how does this program align with your career interests and goals? Do not waste your time applying to schools that you are not interested in attending. While this should go without saying, often students apply to schools based only on reputation without considering the fit, or just to have a safety school, not believing that they could end up there. Instead, choose your schools based on the program’s overall fit.

**Faculty:** Research the faculty in your programs of interest. In your time as a student, you will develop relationships with faculty members that specialize in your area of interest, perhaps have opportunities to conduct research for those faculty members, take classes with them, and be mentored by them. Thus, researching to learn if there are faculty members who specialize in your area of interest will help you determine if the program is a good match for you. Also consider the student to faculty ratio, the friendliness and approachability of faculty members, and the student research opportunities that are available.

**Accreditation:** An accreditation is a universally recognized symbol that means that your school has met a high standard of excellence. Choosing accredited schools dramatically enhances the value of your degree, which is especially important as you look for employment after graduation. For more information and a complete list of accredited institutions, please visit this website: <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/FAQAccr.aspx>

**Reputation:** Similarly, having a graduate degree from a highly ranked program can help you as you look for jobs in all stages of your career. Often, programs are ranked differently than the school is as a whole, so it is important to do your research (see page 25 for helpful resources). However, a person should be wary of picking a school solely on reputation, as rankings typically fluctuate over time. Moreover, reputation extends beyond ranking, including factors such as the faculty, style of teaching, and additional programs. If a school has a strong reputation for experiential learning or for research, knowing this in advance can help you make an informed decision based on your interests. Likewise, consider the reputation of the students in the program, such as whether or not they are friendly. This is important to consider because these are students that you will be taking classes with, working in groups with, and networking with throughout graduate school and after graduation.

## Ways of Evaluating Programs

Now that you have a set of criteria to use to evaluate institutions, how can you go about gauging these factors? Use the following methods to learn more about programs:

**Research:** Research programs by reading articles, reviewing school websites, talking to people and professors in your field, and referring to annual reports such as Peterson's Guides and U.S. News.

**Attend:** Attend graduate school fairs and speak with admissions representatives. Often, the representatives at these fairs will be the same people who review your application. Thus, be sure to be prepared, polite, and professional when interacting with them. For example, come with a few questions in mind before attending the session. They will be able to answer specific questions regarding the characteristics of the program, student life, application deadlines and materials, to name a few.

**Interact:** Talk with current or former students, alumni, and faculty. Ask them for their evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. In these interactions, be sure to be kind, polite, and respectful, as they may have input as to whether or not you are admitted into the program.<sup>1</sup>

**Align:** Determine if the academic strengths of the department fit your career goals by comparing what you find online and in your interactions to your own goals. A strong match in this area is important as you prepare for your career after graduation. For example, if there is alignment, then your advisors can help you find career opportunities and network as you prepare for graduation. Additionally, faculty members' specialties will influence the program's course offerings.

**Visit:** If possible, visit your schools of interest and take a campus tour. This will give you the best chance to get a feel for the program, campus environment, the faculty, and students. If you cannot visit, try to talk with current students or professors for insider information.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/20/how-to-ace-your-grad-school-interview/>



## Factors Considered for Graduate School Admission

Schools consider a variety of factors when evaluating applications. This list is by no means exhaustive, as each school has different requirements when it comes to the application process. Nor is it listed in order of importance, as each school assigns a certain value to each criterion. Generally speaking, however, your test scores and undergraduate record are the most important factors of the application.

### GPA, Academic Major, and Quality of Undergraduate Education

Your undergraduate GPA is one of the most important factors in the admissions process. Admissions councils also consider factors such as the school's ranking, reputation, and grading requirements in evaluating your GPA and overall application. They also consider applicants' undergraduate majors. Most school's admissions councils are interested in admitting a diverse class, which extends to diversity in the class's academic majors. At the same time, some schools have requirements when it comes to undergraduate coursework, so make sure that you have taken the necessary pre-requisites before applying.

### Admissions Tests

Admissions councils also use standardized admissions tests to understand their applicants' qualifications. There are a number of different tests for graduate school, as described below:

#### Graduate Record Exam (GRE):

##### *General GRE Exam:*

- The GRE is a “general” graduate admissions test and is required for most Masters and PhD programs.
- The General Test will examine your verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities in an attempt to measure your potential success in graduate school.
- The GRE Revised General Test is a computerized exam that is section-level adaptive. Essentially, this means that the difficulty level for the second section of each measure is based on your performance in the first section. Test-takers are allowed to skip and return to questions within a section.
- The GRE is offered at many testing facilities. Unlike the other exams, is offered most days throughout the year.
- Scores on the GRE General Test are valid for up to five years.
- Many business schools (MBA programs) now accept the GRE in lieu of the GMAT. However, some still prefer the GMAT.
- Kaplan offers a free practice test on their website:  
[http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm\\_source=field&utm\\_medium=offline&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=evergreen&utm\\_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015](http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm_source=field&utm_medium=offline&utm_term=&utm_content=evergreen&utm_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015)
- For more information and to register go to: [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org).

#### Subject GRE Exam:

- The GRE Subject Test will examine your knowledge of a particular academic subject including: Biochemistry, Biology, Chemistry, Literature in English, Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology.
- These tests are administered on paper three times per year: April, September, and October.
- For more information and to register go to: [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org).

### Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT):

- The GMAT is a standardized test used by most business schools to assess the qualifications of applicants. Scores are used to predict your academic performance during the first year.
- The four sections of the GMAT contain an analytical writing assessment and questions on integrated reasoning, quantitative, and verbal skills.
  - For detailed information on the Analytical Writing Assessment, please see: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam/gmat-exam-format-timing/analytical-writing-assessment.aspx>
  - For detailed information on the Integrated Reasoning Assessment, please see: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam/gmat-exam-format-timing/integrated-reasoning.aspx>
  - For detailed information on the Quantitative Assessment, please see: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam/gmat-exam-format-timing/quantitative.aspx>
  - For detailed information on the Verbal Assessment, please see: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam/gmat-exam-format-timing/verbal.aspx>
- The test is offered most weekdays and some Saturdays, but cannot be taken more than once a month.
- For tips on how to prepare for the GMAT, please see: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam/prepare-for-the-gmat-exam.aspx?WT.svl=HPCallison>
- Kaplan also offers a free practice test for the GMAT: [http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm\\_source=field&utm\\_medium=offline&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=evergreen&utm\\_campaign=grad-pangrad-ftp-2015](http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm_source=field&utm_medium=offline&utm_term=&utm_content=evergreen&utm_campaign=grad-pangrad-ftp-2015)
- For more information and to register go to: [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com).

### Law School Admission Test (LSAT):

- All U.S. law schools registered with the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) require applicants to take the LSAT examination prior to applying. Some other non-JD graduate programs will accept the LSAT instead of the GRE.
- The test is a multiple-choice format that contains reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning questions. There is also a writing sample at the end of the exam, which is meant to demonstrate your writing ability. The LSAC does not score the writing sample. Instead, the LSAC includes the writing sample in the score report it sends to the graduate schools you are applying to.
  - i. For detailed information on the Reading Comprehension questions, please see: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/prep/reading-comprehension>
  - ii. For detailed information on the Analytical Reasoning questions, please see: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/prep/analytical-reasoning>
  - iii. For detailed information on the Logical Reasoning questions, please see: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/prep/logical-reasoning>
- The LSAT is offered four times each year, in February, June, October, and December. Usually, the deadline to register is over one month before the test, so be sure to plan accordingly.
- Kaplan also offers a free practice test:

[http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm\\_source=field&utm\\_medium=offline&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=evergreen&utm\\_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015](http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm_source=field&utm_medium=offline&utm_term=&utm_content=evergreen&utm_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015)

- For a good timeline for the law school application process, see: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/overview/infographic-application-process>
- For additional information on the law school admissions process specifically, please see the following resource guide: <https://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/content/students/gradprep/law-school-packet.pdf>
- For more information and to register go to: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat>

### **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT):**

- Almost all medical colleges require the MCAT examination as a way to compare applicants and to predict first year success in medical school.
- The MCAT is a standardized, multiple-choice test designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, and writing skills in addition to the applicant's knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.
- Scores are given in verbal reasoning, physical sciences, writing, and biological sciences.
- MCAT scores are valid for approximately three years.
- Kaplan also offers a free practice test:  
[http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm\\_source=field&utm\\_medium=offline&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=evergreen&utm\\_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015](http://www.kaptest.com/pages/practice?utm_source=field&utm_medium=offline&utm_term=&utm_content=evergreen&utm_campaign=grad-pangrad-fpt-2015)
- For more information and to register go to: [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org).

## Test FAQs

### **Which test should I take?**

Generally speaking, Masters of Arts and Ph.D. programs require the GRE, MBA programs require the GMAT, J.D. programs require the LSAT, and Medical schools require the MCAT. Recently, some business schools have started accepting the GRE as an alternative to the GMAT. However, each program varies, so be sure to reference your program's specific requirements in order to determine what tests are required. Having a clear sense of the types of programs you are interested in will help you decide which test you should take.

### **I loathe standardized tests because they make me so nervous! How can I overcome test-taking anxiety?**

Remember that the exam is only one component of the application. Students who are relaxed during the exam are able to perform to the best of their abilities. The Counseling Center at Pepperdine is free for all students and can walk you through some strategies to help you relax during the stressful exam environment.

### **Should I take a test preparation course?**

Many of these courses are focused on preparing students to think and approach problems strategically. While sometimes expensive, these courses have high success rates and can educate applicants on best test-taking strategies. Often, these courses offer discounts to Pepperdine students if you attend one of their information sessions on campus. One of the biggest benefits of these courses is that they force you to take the time to review the material covered on the exam. Since you are paying for the course, you have increased motivation to study the material as assigned.

Alternatively, students successfully gain admission to top graduate programs without taking a test preparation course. If you are not interested in a prep course, start studying on your own with a study guide, such as ETS's "The Office Guide to the GRE Revised General Test" or Princeton Review's "Cracking the GRE."

### **My brother's best friend's sister [or insert other relationship here] got a perfect score on the [insert name of exam here] without studying at all. Should I wing the test?**

While a small portion of the population may be able to successfully wing it, the vast majority of people are not able to reach their highest potential score without studying ahead of time. Just as you wouldn't wing the final exam of a class, it's certainly your safest bet to review the material well in advance in order to attain a competitive score. Even the sheer fact of being familiar with the amount of time allowed in each section, the number of sections on the exam, and the material covered will help minimize test-taking anxiety and maximize performance. Additionally, many schools keep track of how you did on your all of your exam scores for the same test, looking at your application holistically. This can be problematic for students who wing their first test and do poorly and then end up taking it again, ending up with a much higher score. Furthermore, given the expense of simply taking the exam, going into the test unprepared may not be cost-effective.

### **I do not think I did well on the test. What should I do?**

Some tests give you the option of canceling your scores at the testing center right after you finish the exam. For example, on the GRE, you can cancel your score immediately after taking the test. However, if you cancel your score, you are not refunded for the test. Keep in mind that the GRE

offers a score select option that lets you choose your best scores, so if you are concerned about one section in particular, score select might be your best option. For more information about the GRE's policies specifically, please visit their website at:

[https://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/test\\_day/policies/](https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/test_day/policies/).

### **I did not do as well as I hoped to do on the test. What should I do?**

First, take a deep breath and do not be too hard on yourself. If you are following the Career Center's suggested timeline listed on pages 18-23, we have allotted enough time for students to retake the test as needed and still attend graduate school immediately after finishing college. Remember that while test scores are an important part of the graduate school application, they are not the only factor considered. Schools look at candidates holistically, considering their grades and personal statements, among other criteria, in making their admissions decisions. If you truly do not want to take the exam again, you can move forward with your current application and work hard to make sure you are stellar in all other areas. Alternatively, you can decide not to apply to graduate school anymore. However, do not base this decision solely on your scores; instead, consider if graduate school still aligns with your goals.

### **Can I get a test waived?**

Some institutions do not require a standardized test. For example, Pepperdine University's School of Public Policy does not require Seaver students to take the GRE. Some schools allow you to replace one test for another, such as replacing the GRE with the LSAT, as is the case with Pepperdine University's Master's in Dispute Resolution program. Do your research on each school to learn about your options so that you can make an informed decision.

### **Can I get a fee waiver for the exam?**

The GRE allows eligible students to receive a 50% discount on the exam. Apply as soon as possible for these fee reductions, as they are distributed on "a first-come first-serve basis." See [https://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/services/fee\\_reduction/](https://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/services/fee_reduction/) for details on the GRE's financial assistance program. Likewise, if you meet the criteria set out by the LSAC, you are eligible for a LSAT fee waiver. See <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/fee-waivers> for more information. Students interested in medical school can also receive a fee waiver for the exam. For information on eligibility and how to apply, please see <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/eligibility/>. Unlike the others, the GMAC does not give fee waivers to students themselves for the GMAT. However, it does give schools the opportunity to apply for grants, which they can use to assist students who want to take the GMAT. Thus, sometimes your undergraduate institution can help you with a fee waiver. For additional information, please see <http://www.gmac.com/frequently-asked-questions/fee-waivers.aspx> and <http://www.gmac.com/reach-and-recruit-students/prepare-candidates-for-the-exam-classroom/assist-candidates-with-gmat-exam-fees/gmat-vouchers.aspx>.

## Personal Statement<sup>2</sup>

Another factor considered by admissions councils is the Personal Statement. This is an ideal opportunity for students to “speak” to the admissions committee. Applicants can use this part of the application to give a picture into their personality and research and professional interests. Many people recommend writing this as if you were writing directly to the professor of interest. Be sure to follow page restrictions and answer the questions requested, if applicable. In your statement, discuss the program you are applying to, personal and academic background, research and professional interests, research and teaching experience, ways in which this program will fit those needs, which professor you hope to work with, and how this person’s research matches with your interests. Be sure to have your advisor, a professor, a Writing Center tutor, and/or a Career Center Industry Specialist or Career Ambassador read over your statement. The more eyes the better. For more information on writing a personal statement, please see the Career Center’s website:

<http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/graduate-fellowships/improveyourchances/personalstatements.htm> and <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/students/gradschool/>

## Letters of Recommendation

Letters of Recommendation are an important part of the graduate school admissions process. In choosing your recommenders, please consider the following information:

- **Read the Directions:** While most schools ask for 2-3 letters of recommendation, each school has their own requirements when it comes to letters of recommendation. Some will ask for academic recommendations, others for supervisor recommendations, and others for recommendations from both.
- **Choose your references carefully:** Your letters serve as a strong support of who you are as a student and what you can potentially offer to a graduate program or department. Remember that the credibility of your references hinges on the people you select to serve as your recommenders. That is, a letter of recommendation from one of your parents will not be seen as credible. Choose people who know you in a professional, leadership, or academic capacity, such as a boss, coach, or professor, to name a few.
- **Connect:** When you decide to apply to graduate school, start by re-establishing connections with professors who know you well but you may not have been in contact with recently. For example, stop by a professor’s office hours to catch up.
- **Ask:** Ask each professor whether they will be able to write you a “strong” letter of reference. Almost any professor can create a standard form to write a recommendation but this will become obvious to the admissions committee. You want to strive for a personal and well-written recommendation.
- **Time:** Once you have selected your recommenders, be sure to give them enough time to write you a strong recommendation.
  - How much time is enough time? At least 6 weeks is an appropriate amount of time. Many advisors recommend giving the professor a deadline 2 weeks earlier than necessary to ensure that all of your application materials reach the admissions committee on time.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://blog.petersons.com/2013/10/17/personal-statement-vs-statement-of-purpose-whats-the-difference-is-there-one/>

- **Create a Reference Packet:** By creating a reference packet, you give your recommender more information to work with, which will make it easier for him or her to write you a strong letter. This packet should include important documents for the people writing your letters of recommendation. In your packet, include your statement of purpose, CV/resume, reference forms for each school or information about how to submit the recommendation (via mail or online), a list of schools you are applying to and professors/research focus at each school, deadlines, and a stamped (and addressed) envelope for each letter if it is to be mailed in directly. It is also helpful to write a letter to the recommender reminding them of how long they have known you, in what capacity, any of accomplishments or goals you achieved as their student or while working with them, and any specific areas you would like them to emphasize in their letter.

### **Honors and Awards**

Individual honors and awards may play a role in your admission. A good place to highlight your honors and awards is in your letters of recommendation and resume/CV if requested. For example, most schools will be interested in knowing about the academic awards you have received, such as Dean's List or Regent's Scholar.

### **Leadership and Volunteer Experience**

Schools like to admit students who have been actively involved as undergraduates. For example, some schools, like Pepperdine, especially emphasize service, since it is a part of our mission statement. With that in mind, be sure to share your leadership and community involvement with the admissions staff as a part of your application.

### **Writing Sample**

Sometimes schools will require students to submit undergraduate papers as writing samples. Often, they ask for research papers, as a large component of graduate education is research. In other cases, they may ask you to respond to a supplemental prompt to serve as your writing statement. Be sure to check each program's website to learn if you need to submit a writing sample, and if so, what type.

### **Undergraduate Research, Publications, and Affiliations**

Because research is a large part of most Master's and PhD programs, graduate school admissions councils love to admit students who have participated in undergraduate research. Students should consider writing an honors thesis as an undergraduate to become familiar with writing a long, academic, and research-driven paper. This will impress the admissions committee and will prepare them for the many research papers to come in graduate school. Similarly, students can consider seeking publication for these papers in order to further refine their writing skills and stand out in the application process. Likewise, presenting at academic conferences gives students the opportunity to be exposed to the research process.

### **Internships**

Internships are a great way for students to get exposed to the line of work that they might be interested in if they attended graduate school. At the same time, it can help differentiate you as an applicant by showing the admissions committee that you have knowledge of and a passion for the field. Even if you have interned in a different field, it can still be a good experience to highlight as an applicant. Some programs will be looking for internship or work experience specifically, so including that as a part of your application in your resume/CV, personal statement, interview, and/or

recommendations can help you stand out.

### **Work Experience**

Some programs require full-time work experience before application. For example, many MBA programs require that applicants work full-time for at least 2 years before applying to the program. Even for schools that do not have full-time work experience requirements, schools are still interested in student and summer work experiences. You can highlight this experience on your CV, in your personal statement, in your interview, and in your recommendations.

### **Diversity**

Graduate schools look at candidates holistically and consider diversity that students bring to the table, including geographic, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, to name a few.

### **Prerequisite Courses**

Many programs require that students take specific courses as undergraduate students in order to have a certain level of knowledge going into graduate school. Make sure you meet all the undergraduate prerequisites for the program. If you are missing a class that is required for the program, you will need to take it in order to be considered for the graduate program you hope to attend. Even if you have not taken these courses as an undergraduate, or if your college does not offer them, you need to take them before applying to the program unless otherwise stated by the school you are applying to. Admissions officers will not consider your application if you are missing the required pre-requisite courses.

### **Time Spent as an Undergraduate**

Admissions councils are concerned about accepting students who will fit into their graduate environment and will progress and complete the degree at a reasonable rate. Thus, they consider the amount of time it took applicants to obtain their undergraduate degrees. At the same time, they account for special circumstances. For example, for students who have worked full-time while in school, graduating in four or five years may not be feasible. Likewise, transfer students may take more time because courses from their prior institution may not count at their new institution. If this is relevant to your experience, then you can choose to explain special circumstances in your letters of recommendation or your personal statement.

### **Personal Interview**

While not all schools require personal interviews or even offer them, the personal interview is a great way to showcase yourself as a candidate outside of the test scores and GPA. In your interview, you can speak to all the other aspects of yourself that make you who you are and are relevant to the program. Sometimes these interviews are conducted by alumni. Alternatively, some schools host students for interviews. Especially for medical schools, the interview is a large part of the application process.

Before going to the interview, it is essential that you prepare. Stop by the career center to arrange a mock interview with an industry specialist. Having a practiced answer for why you want to attend that particular program is helpful. For an extensive interviewing guide, see



<https://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/students/interviewing/> and for another helpful article, see <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/20/how-to-ace-your-grad-school-interview/>.

For all interviews, candidates should strive for the highest standards of professionalism. This includes dressing appropriately, since in your interview, you are giving the admissions council a tangible impression of yourself. Professionalism also includes polite email etiquette as you arrange the interview. In addition, professionalism extends to sending a follow-up thank you note to your interviewer(s), both via email within 24 hours of the interview, and via snail mail in the form of a hand-written note. For more information, please see:

<http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/20/how-to-ace-your-grad-school-interview/>

### **Curriculum Vitae (CV)**

The CV is used to exhibit and summarize academic achievements, including the following: degree(s) received/school(s) attended, advanced training/certifications, thesis/projects, teaching and research experience, professional organization memberships, publications, presentations and attendance at conferences, and relevant coursework. Unlike the resume, the CV does not have a one-page limit and should showcase **all** of your academic experiences. For an extensive guide on CV writing, please see the Seaver College Career Center website:

<http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/students/resumes/>. Stop by the Career Center anytime Monday-Friday 8-5pm for CV editing from one of our Career Ambassadors.

## Suggested Timeline for Applying to Graduate School

This timeline is a guide for students interested in going to graduate school in the fall after their undergraduate graduation in the spring. While this is not the only workable application schedule, it is a good place to start. The important thing is to draw up a schedule at the beginning of the application process, make sure you account for all foreseeable factors, and most importantly, follow it throughout the application period to ensure that you have met all of the necessary criteria. Regardless of the schedule you use, be sure to **prepare your application materials and apply early** to avoid last minute mistakes and unnecessary stress.

### Junior Year

#### September

- Take the Strong Interest Inventory (SSI) test to get a list of your top 10 career matches. Meet with one of the Seaver College Career Center's Industry Specialists to review your results and discuss potential career paths.

#### October

- Begin researching summer internships in your field of interest. Doing so will give you exposure into a particular field. Additionally, interning will help give you a sense of if you need a graduate degree or not to advance in a particular field. Your boss, mentors, and colleagues can also recommend graduate programs to you.
- Alternatively, apply for Pepperdine's Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP) or Summer Undergraduate Research in Biology (SURB) to participate in undergraduate research with a professor. These programs expose students to an intensive research study, giving them a sense for whether or not they would like to go to graduate school. It also helps students build strong relationships with a faculty member, which will come in handy when you are looking for recommendations. You can also seek to publish your research and present your findings at academic conferences.
- Attend Pepperdine's Graduate School Career Fair. There will be many graduate schools in attendance, both from Pepperdine and from other universities. Speaking with these admissions representatives is a great way to learn about specific programs.

#### November

- Register for classes that are pre-requisites for the graduate programs you are interested in. Also, consider registering for research and writing intensive courses to give you a strong background in these areas.

#### December

- Contact your mentors and professors. They are great sources of career advice and can likely recommend some good programs. In addition, some professors are willing to help you make some connections with other professionals in the field. Furthermore, your professors can help you later when it is time to ask them for letters of recommendation. Developing a strong foundation for your relationship early on can help them write you a meaningful recommendation.

## January

- Apply to write an honors thesis, if applicable to your major. Writing an honors thesis is a good idea because it shows graduate admissions councils that you have strong writing and research skills, which are essential for many graduate programs.

## February

- Begin your online research of graduate programs that match your interests, values, and career goals.
- Visit the official websites for various graduate programs that you are interested in to learn about the program's requirements, the school's mission statement and values, and the structure of the program.
- Follow schools on social media to get a sense of daily life at the school. Many schools now have Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts to give prospective students insight into what a typical day at that school would look like. For example, Pepperdine University School of Law has an Instagram with frequent updates that gives prospective students a glimpse into the Pepperdine Law experience.
- Attend Pepperdine's Career Week Events. During Career Week, there are sessions on the graduate school application process, Pepperdine's numerous graduate programs, and industry-specific sessions. Reference the Career Center's website and Handshake to register for Career Week and receive a full list of the week's activities.
- Register for and attend Pepperdine's Career Fair. There will be many graduate schools in attendance, both from Pepperdine and from other universities. Speaking with these admissions representatives is a great way to learn about specific programs.

## March

- Identify the necessary test(s) for your programs of interest. Next, take a practice test. Pepperdine sometimes offers free practice exams for students. The Princeton Review offers a free GRE practice test: <https://www.princetonreview.com/grad/free-gre-practice-test.aspx>
- Consider registering for a prep course. While sometimes expensive, these courses educate you on best test-taking strategies. Often, these courses offer discounts to Pepperdine students if you attend one of their information sessions, many of which are offered on campus. If you are not interested in a prep course, start studying on your own with a study guide, such as ETS's "The Official Guide to the GRE Revised General Test" or Princeton Review's "Cracking the GRE." Create a study plan for yourself to ensure that you stay on track, allotting enough time to each area to review.

## April

- If you are not already sure, research and decide on your specific area of concentration within your field of interest. For example, if you are interested in Biology PhD programs, determine whether you are interested in molecular or plant biology programs.
- Continue your test prep.
- Register to take the test in June. Registering early will give you the opportunity to pick your most convenient test center, avoid additional late registration fees, and ensure you can take the test when you want to take it. Some tests, like the LSAT, close off registration over 1 month in advance, so it is essential to plan ahead.

## May

- Talk to professionals in your prospective field to learn more about what it's really like to do this type of work and the long-term opportunities that are available.
- Leverage the Pepperdine Career Network to gain access to hundreds of alumni and friends of Pepperdine who are available for career conversations (informational interviews), resume critiques, or mock interviews. Through this website, you can search by industry or job title to find individuals who are willing to answer your questions about specific industries or job roles. You can also do a keyword search to find individuals who have attended the graduate schools you are interested in attending.

## June

- Take the test. If you are not happy with your scores, this gives you plenty of time to retake the test(s) by mid-October.
- Contact prospective graduate programs and request additional information, including course catalogs and financial aid information.

## July

- Begin writing your personal statement. Starting your writing over the summer will help you define your grad school goals, allowing you to further hone your list of schools. Moreover, beginning over the summer will give you plenty of time to get feedback from your professors/advisor well in advance of the deadline.
- Create a "Schools of Interest" spreadsheet to organize your research, such as the one below.

School	Program	Degree	Deadline	Materials	Completed	To-Do	Re or
Pepperdine University	Dispute Resolution	Master's	Early March	-GRE -Personal statement -Short Response -3 Letters of Recommendation -Resume -Transcript	-GRE -Short Response -Ordered and sent transcript	-Review Personal statement with Career Center -Remind recommenders to send letters	-Re

## Senior Year

### August

- Narrow down and finalize the list of schools you plan to apply to. Update your schools of interest matrix to reflect your changes.
- Register for the September or October GRE Subject Test, if necessary for the programs you are applying to. The Subject Tests are still administered on paper and are only given three times a year, which are April, September, and October. Begin reviewing the material relevant to the subject test.

### September

- Continue studying for and take the GRE Subject Test if you have selected the September test date.
- Once you have isolated the most appealing schools, pick a professor or two from each program whose interests align with yours and start to familiarize yourself with their work. Learn about their current research and read their most recent publications. Many students also attempt to establish contact with the department chair and faculty members at prospective graduate programs. Reaching out to these individuals can help you to get a better understanding of the program and its faculty members. It can also help you determine if they are accepting students for the upcoming year.
- Contact a current graduate student in the program. Because the student has been in the same situation as you, he or she is often willing to provide honest insight. Speaking with a current graduate student is beneficial because he or she can help you understand the campus culture and the pros and cons of the program. Contact the admissions office to get connected with a current student.
- Contact your two or three professors, or two professors and one supervisor to write your letters of recommendation. Some schools have specific requirements as to who can write your recommendations so pay attention to instructions!

### October

- Look into merit-based grants and fellowships as possible ways to help finance your education.
  - Add any financial assistance application deadlines to your matrix schedule.
  - Look into scholarships offered by the school that you are applying to.
  - Research graduate assistantship, teaching assistantship, and fellowship positions.
  - For a list of helpful financial aid resources, please see page 25.
- Keep polishing your statement of purpose.
  - Ask a professor, career ambassador, academic advisor, and/or an industry specialist in the Career Center to review your personal statement.
  - Consider gathering feedback on it from other people who know you well, including family members and close friends.
  - Bring your personal statement to the Writing Center for a final review of your sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Book an appointment online at: <http://community.pepperdine.edu/seaver/writingcenter/>
  - Having multiple proofreaders will give you more perspectives and helpful feedback to incorporate into your final document.
- Continue to prepare for the GRE Subject Test if you are taking one. Arrange to have scores sent directly to the schools you are applying to.
- Begin completing your application forms. It is best to complete your applications online, as it is

faster and easier than doing so in print. If you are doing any applications on paper, be sure to request the hard copies now.

- Request official transcripts, paying careful attention to where they should go. To request a transcript, visit OneStop or order one online at: <http://www.pepperdine.edu/registrar/transcripts/>
- Send your recommenders the appropriate forms, including the latest version of your personal statement, your CV or resume, and stamped-and-addressed envelopes to school sites, carefully noting where each letter should be sent.

### **November**

- Refine your personal statement, tailoring it to each school as necessary.
- Double check the details of your application and tie up any loose ends. For example, do you know where your recommendation letters are? Have you made sure that all your test scores have been sent to schools? Are you aware of financial aid and scholarship deadlines?

### **December**

- Complete and submit all your applications. Keep a copy of each part of each application for your personal records. Congratulations on finishing this big step in the application process!!!
- Verify that your recommenders have sent all of your letters to the institutions that require them.
- Research deadlines for funding opportunities in your program(s), including graduate and teaching assistantships.

### **January**

- Focus on financial aid. Fill out the FAFSA online. To qualify for financial aid, you need to complete the FAFSA as soon after January 1st as possible. Look into private loans and any alternate sources of funding available.

### **February-March**

- Try to relax while you wait it out. This may be the most relaxing time you will have for the next several years, so take advantage of it while you can!
- Write thank you letters to those who helped you during the application process, such as your faculty recommenders.

### **April**

- Acceptances: Congratulations! Take a moment to celebrate your successes.
  - Assess your financial aid package and use financial aid comparison calculators online to compare packages that schools give you.
  - Investigate applying for alternative loans if the financial aid package offered does not meet your needs.
  - Visit campus, if possible, especially if you have not had the chance to see the school yet.
  - Set up informational interview sessions with professors, current students, program advisors, and financial aid officers. You can do this when you visit schools. If you are unable to visit, you can do this virtually.

- Waitlists: Decide whether or not you want to stay on a school's waitlist.
- Rejections: Almost every applicant for graduate school will receive at least one rejection throughout the application process. While that will not be fun, it's not quite the final word on the matter. Contact the specific department and politely express your regret at not being admitted. Do not expect them to be able to give you a lot of their time, but do take advantage of the opportunity for some useful research. Ask them if they can give you some suggestions on how you might strengthen your candidacy in the future, or if they can highlight the weaknesses in your application that resulted in your rejection. Soliciting feedback will allow you to learn from the rejection.

## Paying for Graduate School

The high cost of graduate school can be a factor preventing individuals from applying. Fortunately, there are resources available that can help alleviate the costs of graduate school.

**Fellowships:** Fellowships are great ways for students to help fund their graduate study. Please visit <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/graduate-fellowships/about/> and <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/graduate-fellowships/fellowships/?sel=gradstudyresearch> for more details. For international students interested in studying in the US, or American students hoping to study abroad, Fulbright is one organization that offers funding for research and teaching for graduate students. Please see <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/> for more information on Fulbright specifically.

**Internal Scholarships:** While there are typically fewer scholarship options for graduate students, most universities have some aid for graduate students. Research scholarship opportunities available at your university and be sure to apply before the deadline.

**External Scholarships:** There are several scholarship websites for graduate students specifically. Please see page 25 for more information.

**Graduate Assistantships:** Many schools offer graduate assistantships for graduate students. Like a Resident Advisor position, students are given free housing and meals in exchange for on-campus work. Sometimes these assistantships are with professors, where students serve as Teachers' Assistants or Research Assistants. In other cases, they are departmental, with students helping undergraduate students in offices such as Housing and Resident Life or the Career Center. Pepperdine offers several graduate assistantships, some of which are Student Affairs Internships.

**Work full-time while in school by applying for part-time graduate programs:** Many schools accommodate working professionals by offering part-time graduate programs, weekend classes, and/or evening classes. This style allows students to make money while in school. Some companies offer tuition reimbursement programs, which can help you save money. Likewise, sometimes students who are working full-time for the university that they are attending are able to take classes for free. Pepperdine, for example, offers free MBA classes to full-time employees. Research these opportunities to see if they are possibilities for you.

**Work part-time while in school:** Students can work part-time to gain work experience while in graduate school. For example, Pepperdine offers part-time student employment opportunities that give students the opportunity to gain work experience and make money.

**Loans:** Students can take on loans to help alleviate the immediate costs of graduate school by delaying them until after graduation.

**Babysitting, dog walking, tutoring, private lessons, and housesitting:** These jobs often have flexible schedules, allowing you to work around your class and homework schedules.

**Have a garage sale before going to graduate school:** This is a good way to clean out the closet so that you can pack all of your things for graduate school while also making a little extra money.



## Relevant Resources

**Individual Graduate School Advising:** For advising on the graduate school application process, schedule an individual appointment through Handshake, by calling us, or stopping by our office: (310) 506-4184, Seaver College Career Center Tyler Campus Center, Suite 210, or visiting our website at <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/students/gradschool/>

### Interviewing:

<http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/20/how-to-ace-your-grad-school-interview/>

### Personal Statement:

<http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/graduate-fellowships/improveyourchances/personalstatements.htm> and <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/career-services/students/gradschool/>

### Applying to Graduate School:

University of Tennessee Knoxville Graduate School Guide

The Committee on Institutional Cooperation's Graduate School Guide: "Applying to Graduate School: Tips, Timeline, and Tools of the Trade"

"Avoid the Biggest Mistake Prospective Graduate Students Make," by Dr. Don Martin.

<http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/graduate-school-road-map/2012/09/07/avoid-the-biggest-mistake-prospective-graduate-students-make>

### Test Prep:

The Princeton Review states that Pepperdine students or alumni who call the Princeton Review LA Office and mention Pepperdine University Career Center may receive a free test and consultation based on their performance. Please contact Sam Azar at [Sam.Azar@review.com](mailto:Sam.Azar@review.com) or 424.208.5700 or visit their website at <http://www.princetonreview.com/-tp>

Kaplan Test Prep: <http://www.kaptest.com/>

Peterson's Education Center: <https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-test-prep.aspx>

**Financial Aid:** For financial aid resources, see:

Fin Aid: [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)

US News: <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/paying/articles/2010/04/15/looking-to-save-for-grad-school-heres-how?page=2>

Peterson's Education Center: <https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-scholarships.aspx>

Directory of Graduate Schools Financial Aid: [http://www.graduateguide.com/graduate\\_financial\\_aid.html](http://www.graduateguide.com/graduate_financial_aid.html)

Financing an MBA: <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-blog-hub/the-official-gmat-blog/2015/october/money-to-learn-business-school-tuition-assistance.aspx>

**Graduate Schools:** For information about graduate schools and programs, see:

Council of Graduate Schools: [www.cgsnet.org](http://www.cgsnet.org)

Graduate Schools: [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)

U.S. News and World Report -- Top Graduate Programs: <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>

Princeton Review: <http://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school>

Peterson's Education Center: <https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>

Directory of Graduate Schools: [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)