

# Researching Graduate School



If you learn through your occupational research that a graduate degree is necessary to pursue your intended career path, you will want to begin researching graduate programs as soon as possible, so that you have the time to take any required courses and prepare for the admissions application process. Graduate admission requirements can vary by program and institution, so it's best to identify your desired programs to learn what will be required of you as an applicant.

Many organizations rank graduate programs; however, rankings may be based on criteria that is not as important to you (e.g. acceptance rate) as other factors (e.g. faculty with research in a specialty area of your discipline). Use the following steps to begin to research and identify the right graduate program for you.

## Establish Search Criteria

Before you begin researching graduate programs, determine which criteria is most important to you. Then, create an Excel spreadsheet to help compare and contrast graduate programs. Put the names of the graduate programs you discover in the left hand column. Across the top of the page, list the criteria you will be considering. Factors to consider:

- **Degrees Offered:** Does it offer the specific degree program you seek?
- **Research/Academic Focus:** Are there classes and/or faculty in the specialty areas you wish to focus?
- **Accreditation:** Is the program accredited, particularly if in a field that requires a license to work?
- **Faculty Mentor:** Is there at least one faculty member with research or work experience in the specific area you are seeking to focus, particularly if the degree requires a thesis?
- **Admission Standards:** Do you meet the admission standards? Are admission exams required?
- **Location:** If not an online program, is this a place you want to live for two or more years? Is the location a place in which you could secure housing, make professional connections, and find employment?
- **Culture:** Based on campus visits and research, what are the institutional and departmental cultures?
- **Cost/financial Aid:** What are the net costs of this degree, after financial aid?
- **Graduate Assistantships:** Are there graduate assistantships (e.g. Teaching Assistant, Research Assistant, etc.) that could provide you with a living stipend and/or cover tuition, while in school?

## Research Online

You can start identifying and researching graduate programs online by using graduate school search sites, such as:

- Peterson's Directory of Graduate School Programs ([www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com))
- Princeton Review Grad School Directory ([www.princetonreview.com/grad-school-search](http://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school-search))

In addition, you can often view a list of accredited programs for your desired occupation through professional associations (e.g. the American Dental Education Association provides a list of all accredited dental schools in the United States and the American Psychological Association has a database of APA-accredited doctoral programs in Psychology). Even simply Googling "graduate programs in <insert discipline>" can provide a starting point to begin searching.

## **Talk to Faculty and Professionals in Your Intended Career Field**

Make sure that you talk to faculty from your undergraduate institution and professionals working in the field you are seeking to enter for graduate program recommendations. They may be able to offer first-hand information on an institution that they attended, or have knowledge of specific colleges and universities that have reputable programs in your field of interest. They may even be able to make an introduction between you and a faculty member or graduate of a program that you are considering.

## **Visit Colleges and Universities**

Most colleges and universities hold open houses for their graduate and professional schools. These events are great opportunities to learn more about an institution's specific application process and connect with faculty. In addition, you can always contact the Admissions Office at an institution to inquire about individual opportunities to visit a campus, just as you may have when applying to an undergraduate institution.

## **Talk to Graduate Professors and Students**

When connecting with graduate admissions counselors, ask them if it will be possible to speak with faculty members in the specific program for which you are seeking admission. A conversation with the faculty members you are most interested in working with will give you insight into the program and department. Making personal connections with professors could also potentially help your application, as faculty are typically a part of the selection committee.

In addition, you may want to ask an admissions counselor about the possibility of speaking with a graduate student who's currently studying in that department. Do they enjoy working with their professors? What are the pros and cons of the department and the school in general? What advice do they have on how to prepare for the program and stand out as an applicant? Another student may offer you a more candid view of the program you are considering.

## **LinkedIn Search**

Where did area professionals in your intended career field attend graduate school? Conduct a search on LinkedIn and make note of the institutions they attended. If LinkedIn indicates that you know someone in common, ask for an introduction and informational interview to learn more about their experience in that specific graduate program.