



APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Undergraduate Resource Series

Mignone Center for Career Success | 54 Dunster Street

Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences

mcs@fas.harvard.edu | careerservices.fas.harvard.edu



MIGNONE CENTER
FOR CAREER SUCCESS

© 2023 President and Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any way without the express written permission of the Harvard University Faculty of Arts & Sciences Mignone Center for Career Success.

08/23

Mignone Center for Career Success
Harvard University Faculty of Arts & Sciences
Cambridge, MA 02138
mcs@fas.harvard.edu
careerservices.fas.harvard.edu

GETTING STARTED

To begin, ask yourself a few important questions:

What are your MOTIVATIONS?

- Why do you want to attend graduate school? What factors are motivating you?
- Do you have an intellectual passion for a particular field of study?
- Has a professor or mentor encouraged you to pursue a graduate degree?
- Do you feel ready for graduate school, or are you responding to expectations from family, friends, or peers?

What are your GOALS?

- Have you identified some personal and professional goals? How will a graduate degree move you toward them?
- Is a graduate degree a prerequisite to enter your field of interest? Will it help you transition into a new field?

What are your EXPECTATIONS?

- Have you researched the academic responsibilities, lifestyle, and financial and personal obligations of graduate school?
- Are you aware of the marketability of your degree and the job prospects following completion? Have you spoken to people in your field of interest to ensure your perceptions are accurate?

TIMING OF APPLICATION AND ENROLLMENT

When is the right time to attend graduate school? It depends:

- Do you need real-world experience before starting graduate school, or does your field encourage enrollment directly after completing a bachelor's degree?
- Do you need to strengthen your application by taking introductory courses, sitting for standardized tests, or "testing" your interest in the field through an internship or entry-level work?
- What financial, personal, academic, and/or employment obligations need to be met before starting graduate school?
- Do you want to consider taking a "gap year" or two? You might use this time to gain experience to strengthen your candidacy, to clarify your goals and interests, and/or to do something very different before committing to graduate school. If you do take a gap year, research the deferment policies of the schools that interest you. Some programs routinely offer deferrals whereas others discourage them. Either way, prepare as much of your application material as possible, and request letters of recommendation before you leave Harvard.

CONSIDERING DIFFERENT DEGREE OPTIONS

What degree is right for you?

MASTER'S DEGREE (e.g. MA, MBA, MS, MPP, MPH, MFA, EdM)

- One to three years to complete.
- Generally focused on the practical application of knowledge and skills.
- May or may not offer direct career preparation or advancement.
- Usually a terminal degree, but some programs are preparation to apply for continued studies or doctoral degrees.
- Not usually funded – you would most likely be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources.
- You may be able to pursue a program full or part time.
- Because these programs are relatively short, it is important to investigate the level of career services you will be eligible for, and whether these services apply to alumni.

PROFESSIONAL DEGREE (e.g. JD, PsyD, MD)

- Two to four years to complete (but can be slightly longer if a professional practicum/internship is required) and provide focused training leading to specific career paths.
- Generally “terminal” degrees that do not lead to doctoral programs.
- Not usually funded – you would most likely be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources and any grants you might receive.
- In some, but not all, fields, you may be able to pursue your program full or part time.

DOCTORAL DEGREE (e.g. PhD, EdD)

- Four to seven years (or more) to complete and allows you to pursue original research and scholarship in a specific area.
- Usually designed as preparation for a career in university teaching, research, or advanced positions in certain professional fields.
- Very different from undergraduate studies in that it is often narrowly focused and a much more independent experience.
- Conducting research and writing a dissertation are rigorous undertakings that can be intellectually exciting but also may be isolating and challenging.
- Often (but not always) funded with a combination of grants, fellowships, and teaching or research assistantships.
- Almost always full time, but some may allow part-time enrollment.

RESEARCHING GRADUATE SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

Gather as much information as you can! First:

- Talk to professors, mentors, and professionals with expertise in your field of interest. Ask them for suggestions of particularly strong programs and, for the doctoral degree, specific faculty whose research interests complement your own.

- Examine resources online such as *Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs* and field-specific references to review programs of study, tuition and related costs, financial aid resources, and application requirements.
- Review professional journals and articles to learn where professors are doing work that interests you.

Then:

- Weigh the strength(s) of each program, the courses offered, and the work being done by its faculty, in light of your own interests. Also consider asking where alumni have worked after graduation.
- Connect with faculty, current students, and, if possible, alumni of the program. Make every effort to visit the school(s) to get a first-hand perspective on the campus, department, facilities, and people. Ask if there is a dedicated recruiting event for prospective or admitted candidates, or whether you should arrange your visit individually. If visiting is not possible, online recruiting events and campus tours can be helpful.
- Consider faculty accessibility and how often professors meet with their advisees. What are typical class sizes?
- Check out the graduate student facilities and organizations (e.g. housing, office space, computer facilities, libraries, labs, lounges, extracurriculars, support services – including career services specifically designed for graduate students).
- Determine what funding is available, including how, when, and for what purposes they are allocated. Are internship opportunities available? Will the financial support continue for the duration of the program?
- Look into eligibility for research assistantships, teaching assistantships, work for the institution (on campus, or remote if not in residence), fellowships, or grants (internal or external).
- Understand requirements for the degree such as classes, qualifying exams, final projects, etc.
- Find out what percentage of students are offered employment by graduation and the types of jobs and employers they attract.
- Ask about connections to alumni and networking events available to current students and alumni.
- Look into graduate programs that have established diversity initiatives and resources for underrepresented students. Consider programs that actively foster inclusive environments and provide additional support systems and can help you find a community that values your unique perspective.
- Learn about affinity groups, student organizations, and diversity-oriented resources both on campus and within your chosen field of study. These networks are invaluable sources of guidance, support, and connections that can assist you not only during the application process but also throughout your entire academic and professional life.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Create a “short list” of schools that meet your interests and goals and begin the application process. Be sure to pay close attention to deadlines and details!

- Make careful note of all application requirements and deadlines (these can vary!)

- Compile your documents and submit each complete package in a timely manner – ahead of the deadline – to avoid a last-minute rush.
- Solicit letters of recommendation from those who know you well, and who will provide the strongest support for your candidacy. They may be professors or employers, or a combination of both, depending on the type of graduate program you want to pursue. Be sure to give recommenders advanced notice to ensure you can meet the application deadline.
- If standardized test scores are part of the admission process, determine exactly which exams are required (e.g. GRE General, GRE Subject, LSAT, MCAT). Register for and take the tests well before the application deadline, ideally with sufficient time to retake the test(s) if necessary.

APPLICATION ESSAY(S) OR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The essay or statement of purpose is the core of your application. It describes:

- Your intellectual interests and academic preparation in the field.
- Your interest in *this particular* graduate program, including your career goals.
- Possible areas for in-depth study and research.
- A sense of “who you are” as an individual, as well as your potential as a student and, ultimately, as a professional in the field.

Tips for composing your application essay/statement:

- Demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm, maturity, and personal uniqueness, while clearly expressing why the particular program is a good match for your interests.
- Explain your passion for the field and note any connections to the department or program.
- Articulate long-term goals, why you want to go to graduate school, why you’ve chosen this particular institution and department, and, if applicable, any specific faculty member(s) with whom you hope to work.
- Cite any previous work you’ve done in the field and/or discuss past research projects completed or papers published.
- For research-intensive degrees, propose specific questions that intrigue you, how you might approach them, and why pursuing this line of inquiry would contribute new knowledge to the field. You will likely not pursue this particular project for your thesis, but this mini-proposal illustrates your ability to think independently and creatively and allows you to demonstrate how your research interests fit with the department.
- Your essay is viewed as a writing sample - make sure it demonstrates excellent communication skills.
- If there are any deficiencies in your academic background, explain them in the personal statement, or ask a recommender to do so in his/her letter of recommendation.
- Keep your statement(s) succinct.
- Do not overstate or understate your qualifications. Be straightforward in describing your relevant accomplishments and support these with examples. Allow your recommenders to provide the superlatives.
- Ask yourself if the statement is interesting and provides a compelling argument to the committee for your admission into the program.

- Proofread the statement carefully and ask professors, mentors, friends, and Mignone Center for Career Success (MCS) advisors to critique it. Check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

ADVICE FOR REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation can be highly influential. An effective letter of recommendation provides a portrait of who you are beyond your college grades or entrance exam scores. Admission committees rely on letters of recommendation not only to validate what you have written in your application, but also to gather information about your personality, character, and motivations.

Before Asking for a Letter:

First reflect on how these letters can best be used to strengthen your application.

- **Get a sense of what the graduate school is looking for in a candidate** by looking at successful graduates of the program. What qualities do they have?
- **Who do you know who can positively comment on these relevant qualities?** Ideally, your letter writer should be someone who knows you well, is involved with the career you are considering, can compare you to other applicants, and is *very enthusiastic* about supporting your application.
- If you need to provide several letters of recommendation, consider how each letter can fill different needs. **Request letters from individuals who know you in different contexts and can comment on different strengths.** Note: For PhD programs, letters from faculty are typically preferable to those from employers. However, a letter from an employer who has supervised your research is also acceptable.
- **What would you like someone to include in the letter that may be missing in the rest of your application?** Who can comment on your professional behavior? Your maturity? Did you take a particularly challenging sequence of courses that is not necessarily obvious from your transcript? Are there extenuating circumstances that might account for atypical grades?
- Decide whether you want to **waive your right** to see the letter of recommendation. For most graduate programs, confidential letters have greater credibility, and they are assigned greater weight in the application process. Interestingly, many letter writers are less inhibited in praising an applicant when the letter is confidential.
- **Allow plenty of "turnaround time."** You want to ensure the letter writer can write a thoughtful, complete letter without worrying about an unrealistic deadline. Providing a few months is often much appreciated. Then, follow up periodically to ensure the letters are submitted on time.

When Contacting the Letter Writer:

After deciding which individuals can provide the most positive and complete picture of your relevant skills, experiences, and character traits, speak with each of the potential recommenders.

- The letter of recommendation will be especially effective if the writers include **specific examples and instances**. So, provide each letter writer with information relevant to your experience and application. This could be a resume, a personal statement, a reminder of particular incidents or discussions, etc. You might create a few bullet points discussing how this information relates to your application. Let the writer know what would be helpful to include in the letter. Consider whether the writer can comment on any of the following topics:
 - Intellectual ability; rank as compared with Harvard and non-Harvard students
 - Follow-through on assignments; rigor of academic program
 - Depth of involvement and achievement in work, lab, volunteer, extracurricular activities
 - Ability to communicate both orally and in writing
 - Maturity, problem-solving skills, tenacity in reaching goals, curiosity, creativity, leadership, self-discipline, integrity, teamwork
 - Interpersonal skills, including response to criticism, ability to relate to others, capacity for collaborative and independent work, attitudes toward supervision
 - Motivation and potential for success in the graduate program and beyond
- Provide your recommenders with information about each graduate program you've chosen and point out the academic and personal strengths you are asking them to highlight.
- Don't forget to **thank the person writing your letter** by sending a note or small gift. Share the outcome of your application. Not only might the letter make the difference in whether or not you are accepted, you most likely will want to ask for letters again in the future.

AFTER YOU'VE BEEN ADMITTED (CONGRATULATIONS!)

Review the information you gathered about the faculty, courses, graduate student support and resources, location and environment, social life, and financial requirements (including aid packages, if available) at each school. Consider the pros and cons of each option. Your decision should feel right to you!

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR POST-GRAD STUDY

PhD programs are often fully funded by the school, while master's programs typically do not provide funding. This varies by institution and program, so it is best to discuss this with the financial aid office and program to which you are applying.

Master's programs throughout the world typically charge tuition and fees, and the amounts vary. Many schools may also offer financial aid assistance on a case-by-case basis. This varies by school and program, so it is best to ask about this before agreeing to attend.

Financial Aid Resources:

The **Office of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (URAF)** at Harvard College administers a number of fellowships for graduating seniors, and manages the endorsement process for Harvard College first-year students, seniors, and some alumni applying to prestigious national scholarships. Fellowships administered by URAF include the Rhodes, Marshall, and Fulbright, as well as many others, to support post-graduate study. In addition to these, URAF has compiled a list of several external fellowships that students may apply to directly. Examples include the Chevening, Clarendon, and Gates Scholarships. For information, see <https://uraf.harvard.edu/selected-external-fellowships>

Additional Financial Aid Resources:

- U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid:
www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/rsa
- U.S. Department of Labor, Scholarship Search Tool:
careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx
- Harvard University Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, Financing Your Master's Degree:
gsas.harvard.edu/financial-support/funding-aid

RESOURCES FOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

- **Meet with an MCS advisor:** careerservices.fas.harvard.edu
Attend virtual or in-person drop-in advising or appointments. Visit careerservices.fas.harvard.edu for details.
- **Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs:** www.petersons.com
Thumbnail descriptions of graduate and professional programs in education, engineering, law, business, medicine, and nursing, including application requirements and dates, contact information, and program descriptions.
- **GRE-Graduate Record Exam:** www.gre.org
Learn about the GRE, order practice materials, and register for the exams.
- **GraduateGuide:** graduateguide.com
A directory of graduate schools in the US and Canada, plus advice and resources.
- **Fastweb.com and Finaid.org:** www.fastweb.com www.finaid.org
Search for scholarships and learn how to craft a winning application.
- **Graduate School Resource Center – Idealist:** www.idealists.org/grad-schools
Connect to educational options with your future social impact career in mind. The articles offer advice and insights on how to explore educational options, whether graduate school is right for you, how to finance your education, etc.
- **Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice:** id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/012102606/catalog
Advice on and examples of essays for graduate school applications.
- **Is a PhD for Me? Life in the Ivory Tower: A Cautionary Guide for Aspiring Doctoral Students, by Yuval Bar-Or:**
books.google.com/books/about/Is_a_PhD_for_Me.html?id=b09aPgAACAAJ&hl=en

Includes chapters on preliminary doctoral program requirements, the dissertation, financing graduate education, applying to and surviving the Ph.D. program, postdocs, employment, higher education, and life as an academic.

- **Chronicle of Higher Education:** www.chronicle.com
Get advice about making the most of graduate school. The Chronicle of Higher Education is the go-to resource for all things academe.