Dear PSU Students and Alumni:

Congratulations on making the decision to investigate whether graduate or professional school may be a good choice for your future. This is a supplemental guide to help you further explore questions we raise during our workshop: Should I Go to Graduate School?

I would request you to:

- **Learn as much as you can about graduate and professional school in your areas of interest;**

- **Learn as much as you can about the need for a graduate or professional degree for the fulfillment of your goals** (which means you must first know what those goals are); and

- **Learn why—really, why—you wish to pursue a particular path.** Just being *interested* in something is not adequate; you are interested in particular things for particular reasons. Discover these reasons. You must be able to articulate an answer to the *why* question that addresses what is at the heart of your interests and goals.

Do take advantage of resources far and wide to build your knowledge and understanding through summer experiences, internships and research, relevant work experience etc. Complete worksheets A through C and speak to career counselors and faculty mentors to discuss your post-PSU plans.

The URLs in this guide are active as of October 2017. I encourage you to bring any out-of-date links—or outdated advice or information—to our attention.

Wishing you all the best in your educational endeavors!

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WORKSHEET A: Evaluating Career and Life Values, Interests, and Priorities

1. What do I want in my lifetime?

2. What is important to me?

3. What kinds of work and experiences do I find meaningful?

4. What tools and skills do I already have? Do I need to enlarge or expand these tools and skills in order to have a meaningful life?
WORKSHEET B: Knowing One’s Purpose and Goal for Attending Graduate School

1. What are my long and short term goals?

2. What is necessary for me to achieve these goals?

3. How much interest do I have in graduate studies?

4. What are the benefits of not going to graduate school or postponing it?

5. What will a graduate degree do for me, personally?

6. How will a graduate degree add to my career?
WORKSHEET C: Seeking Multiple Perspectives on Graduate School

Write the name of the university at the top and answer these questions for each school:

- What are the different kinds of programs in my field, and which will most benefit my goals?
- How high does the program rate?
- Is the faculty doing research on what I am interested in?
- What are the course & thesis requirements to get my degree?
- How long will it take? What is the graduation rate?
- Can I afford it?
- What are the possibilities of financial aid?
- Do I have the prerequisites for the program?
- What are my chances of being accepted?
- What are my chances of getting a job I want after I complete this degree?
- What is the tuition?
- Are there other fees?
- How much will it cost me to live there? What about climate and diversity?
- Does the university have graduate student housing?
- Will professional licensing requirements tie me to that part of the country?
- Can I pay the expenses to move there?

Researching graduate school is a “mouse click” away. Consult the sites below to research graduate and professional schools. After researching information available on the website, you can contact faculty and current graduate students in your program of interest for a skype or phone appointment to gain more information about the program.

- Peterson's Graduate and Professional Schools
  www.petersons.com
- Grad Schools (portal)
  www.gradschools.com
- Grad Guide (portal)
  www.graduateguide.com
- Graduate and Professional School Profiles
  www.gradprofiles.com
- Council of Graduate Schools
  www.cgsnet.org
- National Association of Graduate–Professional Students
  www.nagps.org
The Application Process

Application policies vary greatly among institutions and even among departments within the same institutions. Be sure that each application you submit is complete, accurate and on time. Most programs will not review your application until all parts are submitted. So, start preparing the application components early. In order to be considered for admission to a graduate program, you may need all of the following:

- Completed application
- Application fee
- Official undergraduate transcript(s)
- Required entrance examination scores
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal essay/statement of purpose
- Writing samples, tapes, portfolios, and auditions as requested
- Personal interview

Application Fee

Each application must be accompanied by a fee that needs to be paid by an accepted method of payment.

Official Transcript

Check your unofficial PSU transcript to ensure accuracy for repeat grades. Contact the Office of the Registrar in person or online via Banweb to request your official PSU transcript. For transcripts from other institutions, contact their registrar’s office.

Admissions Examinations

Each school designates the qualifying examinations required for your chosen discipline. “How To” books and preparation materials are available in the PSU library, online, and in bookstores. Education Testing Services provides free full-length practice tests. Take advantage of these free resources from the test maker. Register for the test date in advance and take the test during your junior year if you plan to attend graduate school immediately upon graduation.

Graduate Records Exam (GRE)  Dental Aptitude Test (DAT)
Miller Analogies Test (MAT)  Optometry Admissions Test (OAT)
Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)  Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT)
Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)  Teacher Testing (PRAXIS)
Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)
**Test Prep Services**

- **Learning Express Library** is a free resource for PSU students and alumni. Choose College Center & create a free account to access GRE, GMAT, LSAT, & MCAT practice tests. PSU library also carries Test prep books you can loan
- **Kaplan Test Prep**
- **The Princeton Review**
- **Educational Testing Services**

**Letters of Recommendation**

Most graduate programs require three letters of recommendation and they rank high on an admission committee's list of evaluation criteria. The individuals you ask to write you a letter can impact how you, as an applicant, are perceived. The letters are supposed to vouch for your undergraduate preparation, your ability to study at the graduate level, and speak to your commitment to the proposed field of study.

**Whom should I ask for letters of recommendation?**

The best letter writers are those who know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed at the graduate level. Generally, the following people make the best letter writers:

- Someone who knows you well in an academic setting
- Someone with the title of "Professor"
- Someone who is a professor at the school granting your bachelor degree
- Someone who has earned the degree which you are seeking in your graduate work
- Someone with an advanced degree who has supervised you in a job or internship aligned with the graduate program you are pursuing (e.g., Public Health, Social Work, Business Administration, etc.)
- Someone who has academically evaluated you in an upper-division class

Note: Letters from family friends, political figures, and the like are discouraged and, in fact, may be detrimental.

**How do I approach potential letter writers?**

First, make a list of professors who will be your best advocates. Then, set up an appointment to discuss your request in person. Do not make the request via email. Be prepared to articulate your interest and reasons for attending graduate school. Letters of recommendation are written strictly on a voluntary basis. The best approach is to ask potential letter writers if they are willing to write you a strong letter. If you sense reluctance or the answer is no, ask someone else.
**When should I approach letter writers?**

Professors are generally pleased to write on your behalf; however, they are busy during the months of November and December. Be considerate of your letter writers’ time and approach them at least two months before you need the letter.

If you plan to take some time off before going to graduate school, you can still request your professor for a "general" letter of recommendation before you leave PSU and keep them. When you are ready to apply to graduate school, contact professors again, and ask them to update the letters.

**How can I go about getting good letters of recommendation?**

Since your best letters will come from those who know you well, make an effort to get to know your professors. Here are some tips – select courses with small class size, take more than one class from a professor, speak up in a class, volunteer to do research for a professor, and share your intention to apply to graduate school early on and ask for their advice to guide you in the process.

The best strategy to get a good letter of recommendation, particularly if a professor has not known you long, is to provide your letter writer with ample information about you. This way, you will get a letter that includes concrete details about you, instead of a letter that contains only your grade, which is of limited value.

**What information do my letter writers need to write good letters?**

You can help your letter writers write strong letters by giving each of them a portfolio comprised of:

1. A cover note that includes:
   - Information on how to get in touch with you in case they need to reach you
   - What you would like emphasized in each letter
   - A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates, with the earliest due date at the top
   - Any other information that is relevant
   - Thank and acknowledge the letter writer’s valuable time and the importance of this letter for your professional growth.
2. Your unofficial transcripts (note courses you took with them)
3. A draft of your statement of purpose
4. A copy of your best work in the course (with instructor comments on it), lab evaluations, projects, etc.
5. Your resume

**Sample Recommendation Letter from Penn State University Online compiled by Joe Schall**

Click here to download a pdf of three sample graduate school recommendation letters.
Personal Essay/Statement of Purpose

Graduate and professional schools often require a written statement -- often called a "statement of purpose," "personal statement," or "letter of intent" -- as a part of the application. Some statements require specific information such as the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Others can be quite unstructured, letting applicant address a wide range of matters. The importance of the statement varies from school to school and from field to field.

Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be chosen. The content must be presented in a manner that will give coherence to the whole statement.

Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out. Pay attention to the audience (committee). The audience is professionals in their field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. You are the amateur.

Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer the questions fully. Usually graduate schools are interested in the following, although the form of the question(s) may vary:

- **Your purpose in graduate study.** Think this through before you try to answer the question.

- **The area of study in which you wish to specialize.** Learn about the field in detail so that you are able to state your preferences using the language of the field.

- **Your intended future use of your graduate study.** Include your career goals and plans for the future.

- **Your unique preparation and fitness for study in the field.** Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.

- **Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester.** Explain in a positive manner. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be appropriate to discuss this outside of the personal statement.

- **Any special conditions not revealed elsewhere in the application,** such as a significant (38 hour per week) workload outside of school. This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.

- **You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?"** Research the school and describe its special appeal to you.

- **Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person.** They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement.
Determine your approach and style of the statement
There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that best fits you.

- Be objective, yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academese."

- Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself and your field and your future goals. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.

- Be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances. See below a list of words and phrases to avoid using without explanation.

- Get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.

- Limit its length to two pages or less. In some instances, it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.

DON'T

- Use the "what I did with my life" approach.

- Use the "I've always wanted to be a _____" approach.

- Use a catalog of achievements. This is only a list and tells nothing about you as a person.

- Lecture the reader. For example, you should not write a statement such as "Communication skills are important in this field." Any graduate admissions committee member knows that.

Words/phrases to avoid without explanation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfying</th>
<th>Invaluable</th>
<th>Stimulating</th>
<th>Meaningful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Appealing to me</td>
<td>Incredible</td>
<td>Helping people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>It's important</td>
<td>Gratifying</td>
<td>Rewarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>I can contribute</td>
<td>Fascinating</td>
<td>Useful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where to go for help
For help figuring out what to write, make an appointment with ACS staff.

- Once you have your draft, request the people you trust such as faculty, friends, letter of recommendation writers, for feedback. The best people to review your statement are those who know you well and have excellent writing skills.

- The Writing Center (Cramer Hall 117) offers writing support

- StatemtOfPurpose.com is an excellent resource that includes essay critiques and writing tips.

Click here to download a pdf of four lengthy essay samples.
Financing Graduate or Professional School

Graduate school is expensive. In addition to tuition and fees, factor in the expenses for housing, food, books, health insurance and miscellaneous. Consider financial feasibility and the return on your investment in terms of career prospects, along with your passions. Explore potential funding sources widely, at both the institutions you are applying to as well as outside sources. Engaging in research and participating in McNair, Exito, and REU at PSU may increase your chance of getting funded for advanced study.

Types of University Financial Aid:

- **Fellowships** are usually monetary awards given on the basis of academic merit. Fellowships may count as taxable “unearned” income. Specific programs and universities have their own fellowships, which are listed on departmental and institutional websites or the schools’ financial aid offices.

- **Assistantships** are usually campus–affiliated work (e.g. graduate teaching, research associate) to provide an individual a stipend and often waive tuition and/or other fees.

- **External Fellowships & Grants** may come from federal/state government or private foundations and are given out to students or paid to the university on your behalf. They have different application deadlines and the level of competition and funding varies.

- **College work–study programs** are offered to eligible graduate students for part–time employment opportunities. Contact Financial Aid offices who generally administer these programs.

- **Loans** are available to U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Both federal and private loans require an application process. Take time to fully understand the repayment plan and the interest rates before signing a legal document.

- **Resident assistantships** may be available at some institutions. Graduate students earn a stipend plus room and board (or both) by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. Feel free to contact the school’s director of residence life to inquire about such opportunities.

Resources for Funding

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Fellowships
- University of Illinois, Fellowship Database
- U.S. News Online
- Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF) General College Scholarships
- 100 Minority Scholarship Gateway List
- FastWeb: Free Scholarship and College Searches & Financial Aid Tools


This book is a classic guide to choosing and applying to graduate programs, and to making the most of your graduate experience.
Read advice on and examples of essays for grad school applications. PSU Library Circulation Desk Reserves (LB2351.52.U6 A74 2012)


The academic job search handbook, Mary Morris Heiberger Julia Miller Vick 2001
Sample of CVs/Resume for graduate schools & fellowships
PSU Library Shelves -- 3rd floor (LB2331.72 .H45 2001)

Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs, Peterson's, annual. www.petersons.com
This guide provides descriptions of graduate and professional programs in the U.S., including application requirements and dates, contact information and program descriptions.

Personal Interview

In some programs, an interview may be required before admission is granted. In addition to being an important factor in gaining admission, it provides you the opportunity of making an assessment of the program. Prepare as you would for an employment interview.

Writing Samples, Tapes, Portfolios and Auditions

These items may be requested for consideration to enter specific programs (i.e. fine arts, design, film, music, or architecture). Be prepared to submit any additional information that is requested to enhance your opportunity for acceptance.