

Graduate and Professional School Guide

This guide is designed to get you started in your graduate school quest. Career advisors and faculty at Oberlin College are available to discuss additional questions and provide guidance on pursuing a graduate or professional degree.

Is Graduate School Right for You?

Graduate school is a decision that should be based on an individual's need for the degree. Many students lacking a career objective believe graduate school is a good alternative to entering the job market. However, the high cost of the degree, intense workload, and small rate of student completion, can make graduate school a costly decision. The cumulative debt graduate students incur typically ranges from \$30,000 to \$120,000, and many students do accumulate even larger amounts of debt (www.finaid.org). Nationally, nearly 50% of doctoral students fail to finish their degrees.

Knowing what to expect can help ensure success in graduate school. There are many differences between graduate and undergraduate education. Many master's and all doctoral programs leave the structure of the program up to the individual. Students are responsible for selecting their advisor and thesis topic, studying for oral exams, and making job search contacts for post graduation. While grades may be the primary focus for getting accepted, teaching classes, publishing papers, presenting departmental seminars, serving on committees, and interacting collegially with faculty are also expected during the program.

To Work Or Go To School First?

Reasons to work prior to graduate school:

- Recharge your batteries

- Learn skills not obtained in school
- Develop confidence
- Investigate fields of interest
- Develop motivation
- Gain experience to aid your graduate application

Reasons to go straight to graduate school:

- High enthusiasm and motivation
- Certain fields recommend continuation (i.e. if you want to be an English professor, it is probably best to try and go straight to graduate school – talk to your faculty advisor)

Master's vs. PhD?

Questions to consider when deciding between a Master's or PhD

- What is needed for my career?
- Within a single department, are master's students able to apply to the PhD program?
- Is it easier to get into the PhD program if you are already a master's student in the program as opposed to applying from the outside?
- How does financial aid compare between the two degrees?

Master's Degree

Master's degree programs are usually one to three years or longer if attending on a part-time basis. The different types of master's degrees include professional or vocational programs that do not lead to a PhD (i.e. MBA) and academic degrees that are often earned as a first step towards a PhD. Both types of programs generally require students to take comprehensive exams prior to graduating. The exams may be written or oral depending on the school and are generally less demanding than PhD qualifying exams. Additionally, a thesis may be required.

PhD Degree

A PhD program usually requires students to attend courses on a full-time basis for at least one year. At the end of the second year, qualifying exams are given and may take several days to complete. In addition, students are often required to teach undergraduate courses and/or assist with research and complete a language requirement prior to degree completion. A thesis/dissertation proposal, paper and defense are also required to obtain a PhD.

Factors to Consider When Selecting a Program

- Emphasis and specialties of the department
- Research interests of the faculty
- Culture of the department
- Prestige of the department
- Financial support available
- Extra-years support
- Attrition policy
- Estimated completion time
- Placement statistics
- Technical resources
- Teaching requirement
- Language requirements (may add a year)
- Social climate

Choosing an Advisor

Finding an advisor at your intended graduate school during the application process is crucial for some fields and programs, but is not necessary for others. Talk with your faculty at Oberlin in order to determine whether and when you should look for a graduate school advisor in your field of study.

If you do need to choose a graduate school advisor, here are some characteristics to seek:

- Career maturity and tenure
- Active and respected in their field
- Academic eminence; well respected
- Political clout
- Will be able to spend significant time with you

When choosing an advisor, put together a short list of possible candidates before you apply to any programs. Talk to your current professors for possible advisor suggestions and university departments. Look for individuals conducting cutting edge research that you have discussed in class or heard at a conference. Go to the departmental website and read through faculty descriptions of potential advisors at graduate schools. Contact prospective advisors and set up an interview while visiting universities.

Interact with your preferred program/school often and build a relationship with them. To get to know the potential advisor, sit in on one of their classes or attend a conference where they are presenting. Talk to one of their current graduate students to learn about the individual. All the while, keep in mind the level of comfort you feel with the person. Do not choose someone who makes you feel uncomfortable or nervous.

Suggested Planning Timeline

Junior Spring – Prepare to Apply

- Request catalogues, and research programs and institutions
- Obtain GRE Information Bulletin & download sample test
- Talk with your advisor and faculty mentors about programs
- Identify and contact potential graduate supervisors
- Begin to solicit letters of recommendation

Summer Before Senior Year – Prepare to Apply

- Accelerate process of choosing schools
- Obtain applications and financial aid materials and note materials required for each one
- Note deadlines and rolling admissions policies for each program

- Request copies of your official transcript
- Draft a general statement of purpose and have it reviewed by faculty or a career advisor
- Register for required graduate admissions exam
- Prepare for graduate admissions exams. You might consider taking a review course, using a test prep guidebook, and/or taking practice tests, depending on the test you plan to take, and your personal learning style and study habits. Whichever method you choose, be sure you plan enough time for thorough preparation.
- Correspond with potential graduate school advisor; continue developing the relationship
- Visit possible advisors and their current graduate students

Senior Year

- Budget application expenses (application fees, cost of entrance exams, transcript fees, etc.)

Fall - Apply

- Complete financial aid applications
- Begin filling out applications as soon as they are available from the institution
- Finalize personal statement
- Follow up with professors who are writing you recommendation letters, but haven't submitted them yet
- Take graduate admissions exams as needed
- Send completed applications, with all required documents, as soon as possible. Many graduate schools consider applications in the order they are received, so be sure to apply no later than one month prior to the deadline. Many others have application deadlines as early as December 1. Keep copies of all applications for your records
- Complete FAFSA in January

Spring – Post Application

- One or two weeks after submitting your application, and well before the deadline, verify with each institution that all materials have been received and your application is complete
- Schedule interviews as needed
- Visit institutions where you have been accepted

- Send confirmation and deposit to your chosen institution
- Notify other programs of your declination to their offer
- Send thank you notes to faculty who wrote you a letter of recommendation and notify them of your decision

Recommendation Letters

Contact faculty or professionals knowledgeable about your personal strengths and abilities. Once you have selected a professor, schedule a time to discuss your future plans and goals. Provide the professor with a copy of your most current resume and your personal statement so he or she may refer to your accomplishments in the letter. If you haven't had a class with your letter writer recently, it may also be helpful to provide a copy of a high quality assignment you completed for him or her. Be sure to provide a reference form if the program includes one with the application materials.

The Office of Career Services has implemented a partnership with Interfolio to maintain reference and credential files electronically for current students and alumni. This service has replaced the former method of maintaining paper-based files through the Reference Service/Student Academic Services. For more information visit www.oberlin.edu/career.

Financing Options to Research

Graduate School Level

- Merit based awards may be offered based on the department's recommendation

Departmental Level

- Admission committee decides who receives funds, typically not based on financial need
- May be able to negotiate offer
- Scholarships, grants and fellowships available (not required to pay back or work)
- Teaching and Research Assistantships are more common for PhD support, but sometimes available for master's students

Financial Aid Office

- Typically need based
- Federal Loans are the largest source of graduate financial aid
- Deadlines are often earlier than application
- Federal aid is based on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Four types of loans are available:

- Perkins – interest accrues after completion of the degree
- Subsidized Stafford – interest is paid by the government until the completion of the degree
- Unsubsidized Stafford – interest begins during your time in the program
- PLUS – interest begins during your time in the program
- Loan repayment assistance programs are available in some

professions. Generally, these programs are intended to encourage public service, work with nonprofit organizations, or work with underserved populations. Check the graduate school's website to see if the school offers loan repayment assistance, and with professional associations to find out if federal or state loan repayment assistance is available in your intended profession.

Grad School Testing Information

All Test Information & Schedules are Available Online

GRE General - www.gre.org

Tests are given year-round at designated testing centers. Register early to get your preferred testing date, and to avoid the busy period of November-January. Schedule your appointment online as soon as you know when you would like to take the test.

GRE Subject Tests - www.gre.org

Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology
Biology
Chemistry
Computer Science

Literature in English
Mathematics
Physics
Psychology

Test Dates

Oct. 10, 2009
Nov. 7, 2009
April 10, 2010

Registration Receipt Date

Sept. 4, 2009
Oct. 2, 2009
March 5, 2010

MCAT - www.aamc.org

24 times in 2009, with most test dates occurring in the spring and summer.

See Carol Sedgwick, the Health Careers Advisor
for additional Medical School testing and admissions information.

LSAT - www.lsac.org

Test Dates

Sep. 26 & 29, 2009
Dec. 5 & 7, 2009
Feb. 6 & 8, 2010
June, 2010

Deadline to Register

Aug. 25, 2009
Nov. 3, 2009
Jan. 5, 2010
TBA

GMAT

www.gmat.org

Tests given all year, please see website for details and locations.

Recommended Reading and Online Resources

Library Resources, Office of Career Services (Stevenson Hall – Longman Commons)

Getting What you Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or PhD,

Robert L. Peters, PhD

Financing Graduate School, Peterson's Guides

Don't Miss Out, Anna and Robert Leider

Grants for Graduate Studies, Peterson's Guides

The Graduate Scholarship Book, Daniel Cassidy

Strategies for Writing Successful Essays, Nell Merriwether

Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why, Donald Asher

The Real Guide to Grad School: What you Better Know Before You Choose – Humanities and Social Sciences, by editors of Lingua Franca

Online

Finding Schools and Rankings:

Petersons Guide: www.petersons.com

Graduate School Guide: www.gradschools.com

US News and World Report: www.usnews.com

Entrance Exams

GRE Information: www.gre.org

LSAT: www.lsac.org

GMAT: www.gmat.org

MCAT: www.aamc.org

Finding Money

Financial Aid Information Page: www.finaid.org

FAFSA site: studentaid.ed.gov

Sallie Mae: www.salliemae.com

Nellie Mae: www.nelliemae.com

FastWeb: www.fastweb.com

Financial Aid for International Students: www.edupass.org

Oberlin Nominated Fellowships Watson, Javits, Gates, Mellon, and more: www.oberlin.edu/career

Entrance Exam Prep Courses

GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT:

Kaplan: www.kaplan.com

Princeton Review: www.princetonreview.com

GRE, LSAT, GMAT:

Cleveland Sate University, Continuing Education

Offers courses, visit www.csuohio.edu/ce or call 216.687.2144 for information/schedule

LSAT:

LSAT Intensive Review: www.lsac.org