



# CAREER DEVELOPMENT OFFICE RESOURCE GUIDE

Graduate School Decisions and Processes



## CONSIDERING GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Many Pomona students and alumni** choose to attend graduate or professional school. Being successful and satisfied with your graduate school experience depends on how much thought you have given to your educational and career goals.

**Should you go to graduate school?** Should you go on directly after graduation from Pomona or wait a few years? There are no hard and fast rules to deciding about grad school. But, it is very important to

- 1) Be clear about your reasons for going to grad school;
- 2) Understand your personal and career goals related to advanced study; and
- 3) Have an accurate picture of the realities of the job market in your chosen field.

**Talk with Pomona faculty**, with students and alumni of target programs, and even with prospective employers, in order to hear their perspectives on the advantages of immediate vs. delayed entry and get their input on particular programs. Understanding the expectations and demands of your chosen field will also help you make the best decision about when to pursue graduate school and what type of program would be most helpful.

**Pursuing graduate or professional school** deserves careful consideration. Contact the staff in the CDO to discuss your personal and career goals and work on your decisions and application process. We look forward to working with you in your search and application.

# CLARIFY CAREER GOALS AND REASONS FOR PURSUING GRADUATE SCHOOL

**The decision about whether or not to attend graduate school** is an important one. In spite of concerns about the economy, graduate study should not be used to delay entry into the working world, but should be clearly related to your career and life goals. In order to understand your reasons for pursuing a graduate education, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my current and future career goals? How does graduate school fit into them?
- What is the job market in my chosen field? Is a graduate degree required or might it enhance my job and salary prospects?
- Will it be easier and/or beneficial to enter graduate school in my field directly after college or after gaining additional related experience?
- How much will graduate school cost, e.g., tuition, room, board, lost/deferred wages? What about financial aid from the university or outside grants in my field? Are there loan forgiveness programs in my field? Are research or teaching assistant positions available? Is there a possibility that a future employer might help pay for my graduate program?

## **Reasons for going directly on to graduate school:**

- You are accustomed to being a student and have momentum;
- Your study skills are sharp;
- You have few personal and financial obligations;
- Your chosen field requires an advanced degree even for entry-level positions.

## **Reasons for working a few years before going to graduate school:**

- You can better know your career goals by working in the field for a few years;
- Many graduate programs require work experience;
- You bring a broader world view to your studies;
- You have a more mature outlook on school and work;
- Some employers will pay some or all of your graduate school expenses;
- You can gain solid financial footing;
- You might improve your chances for acceptance to graduate programs, especially if you were not the best student in your undergraduate program.

## **Consider the following questions to determine if you should pursue graduate school:**

- Do you have a clear sense of what you want to pursue?
- Is an advanced degree needed to enter into your field of interest?
- Do you want to study a certain discipline just for the love of it? Do you want to just give it a try?

## **You may want to reconsider graduate school if any of the following statements is true:**

- You are uncertain about what career to pursue. "Finding yourself" is a common and acceptable reason for a high school student to pursue college, but finding yourself is not usually a good reason for going to graduate school.
- You feel pressure from family and friends even though you aren't that interested.
- You are going simply to delay or avoid the job search in a tough economy.

# TYPES OF GRADUATE DEGREES

There are two traditional categories of graduate degrees — master's and doctoral — although there are also numerous hybrid combined-degree and certificate programs at many universities.

- **The Professional Master's** is generally a terminal degree and stresses the practical application of knowledge and skills and often involves an internship, practicum or field work. The professional master's degree is designed to enable or enhance employment or advancement in a given field such as education (M.Ed.), business (MBA), or social work (MSW).
- **The Academic or Research Master's** is designed for intellectual growth and gives you experience in research and theory. While it may be a final step, the academic master's degree is sometimes a prerequisite for doctoral work within a given field. Master's degrees may take one to three years to complete.
- **The Professional Doctoral** degree stresses the practical application of knowledge and skills. These degrees include the Doctor of Medicine (MD), the Juris Doctor (JD), the Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) and the Doctorate of Psychology (Psy.D.)
- **The Research Doctoral** degree is the Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.). This degree involves advanced coursework in a chosen field and a major research project called a dissertation, and usually takes from three to six years to complete. A Ph.D. is generally the degree required for university teaching positions.



# BEST SOURCES TO LEARN ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS

**Professors:** Talking with your faculty is one of your best sources of information and input into graduate school. Professors know you, they know the field, they know which programs are a good fit for students from Pomona College, and they often have connections and colleagues at graduate programs where you might like to apply.

**Students and Alumni:** Pomona alumni at or from specific graduate programs will give you honest information about the quality of the program and the faculty.



**Peterson's Guides:** Peterson's list every accredited graduate program in the United States. They are a little dense and boring, but if you want to learn about programs there is no other complete resource. The full set of guides is available in the CDO and in all major university libraries.

**Specialty Guides:** Professional associations often recommend graduate programs in their field. Identify professional associations for your area and check out their program recommendations.

**Academic Journals in Your Field:** Top students get grad school ideas directly from the academic journals. Often, the best programs generate the best research and articles. Read your fields journals to find topics and research that interests you. Identify where those authors teach and where they attended graduate school.

**Internet Resources:** Check for key online resources for graduate school information through [Sagehen Career Tools](#). Be sure to research professional associations in your field as they often have excellent graduate program recommendations and career advice.

# CHOOSING A SCHOOL AND PROGRAM

**Once you have determined a specific career goal**, look for programs with strong reputations in those particular areas. Many professional associations will list recommended or accredited programs in their field. There are also outside publications that “rank” schools and programs. But remember sometimes the school with a strong reputation in your area of interest is not a school with an overall national reputation. The best way to find programs suited to you is to do research in your specific areas of interest.

- Ask professors, mentors or professionals in the field for program recommendations. Check out programs recommended by professional associations in your field.
- Study journals to identify faculty doing cutting-edge work in your field. Contact those faculty to tell them of your interest in their work and that you plan to apply to their program. Mention your specific areas of interest and possible research topics. Send them a copy of your research papers and tell them that you’d like to work with them if you are accepted. In many instances, faculty with whom you have networked will advocate on your behalf to the program admissions committee.
- Talk to recent alumni of your target programs to learn about their experiences.
- Research graduates of different programs to learn where they are working and what they are doing.

**Research graduate fields through online resources** including [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com), [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com), and [www.gradschool.com](http://www.gradschool.com). There are many resources available with graduate school profiles, financial aid information, and additional graduate school information. Check out your target university and program sites as well as the resources available through the CARL system in the CDO.

## CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING GRADUATE PROGRAMS

**The criteria you use to evaluate your target programs** may include some or all of the following considerations (listed alphabetically). As you research programs, be sure to identify and focus on the unique key factors that are most important to you and your particular career goals.

**Accreditation:** There are two main types of accreditation: institutional and program-specific. You should determine the proper accreditation degree programs in your field require. Note: a school or program that is not properly accredited may not openly volunteer this information — so dig deeply.

**Admission Standards:** Most schools publish this kind of information, so look for the number of applicants compared to the number of acceptances. You could also look at base requirements for admission, which usually include undergraduate grade-point-average and standardized test scores.

**Career Assistance:** One of your main goals for earning an advanced degree most likely revolves around career advancement — either getting a new job or entering a new field. Examine the amount of career development and job search assistance each program provides to graduates. Also look at where each school’s graduates are working (along with their salaries, if possible). Most programs will allow you to talk with current students of recent graduates.

**Cost/Financial Aid:** Examine all associated costs, including tuition, books and supplies, housing, and miscellaneous fees and expenses. Then review the types of financial assistance each program is offering you, including grants, loans, and fellowships. If you are a top candidate, don't be afraid to negotiate; if a school really wants you in their program, they will work to find additional resources for you.

**Culture:** Just as all organizations have corporate cultures, "the way things are done around here", so too with graduate schools. Identify schools with cultures that fit your style and comfort-level so that you'll have a better chance to excel. Some call this concept the philosophy of education. For example, do you prefer a competitive environment, or one that is more collaborative and nurturing?

**Degrees Offered:** Make sure you know the specific degree/certificate you need to take for the next career step you are seeking. Don't compromise or consider a lesser degree.

**Faculty:** A graduate program is only as good as the faculty who teach in it. It's important to work with faculty who are respected and known in your field. You need to establish a method to evaluate each program. The most basic measure is looking at the percentage of classes taught by full-time, terminally qualified faculty – are the faculty accessible? Also investigate the reputation of the faculty by examining things such as the number of scholarly publications, the national or regional acclaim of faculty members, and/or the professional experiences of the faculty.

**Location:** Just as with your undergraduate choice, location is an important factor. Depending upon the degree you are seeking, you will live in that geographic area for several years. More importantly, except for top-tier programs, the value of an advanced degree is often strongest in the region where the school is located and known. So, if you want to eventually live in the Pacific Northwest, it might make more sense to attend a graduate school in that region rather than one on the East Coast.

**Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities:** Better programs tend to be diverse -- because diversity (of all types) often leads to a broader world view. Examine both the faculty and student composition. You need to determine a mix where you'll feel most comfortable. Also, if you are interested, you might see if the programs offer an international study opportunity.

**Physical Facilities:** What is the condition of the building(s) of each program? Do they have all the tools you need for your specific interests? Investigate programs that stress "state-of-the-art" facilities to see if they really are state-of-the-art. More fundamentally, make sure the programs have the types of facilities you need. For example, if you plan to specialize in market research, you'll want a program that not only has great computer facilities, but also one that has behavioral labs for events such as focus groups.

**Reputation/Ranking:** While rankings are an important measure of graduate school quality, be sure to investigate the source of the rankings. Examples of organizations that rank graduate programs include U.S. News and Business Week and The Gorman Report. But national ranking may not be as important as other criteria both because of flaws in the ranking process, and because of your particular and unique interests and goals. Be sure to review your field's professional associations for approved or recommended programs. Programs may be accredited by a regional accrediting board, but not have the recommendation of the professional association.

**Research/Academic Focus:** Graduate programs tend to have a strength or focus in one or two areas of a specific discipline. Fully investigate the faculty interests and research areas of each program. For example, one law school may excel at trial and litigation but may not be as strong in other areas, such as environmental law.

**Resources:** This is sort of a catch-all category. We used to talk mainly about library resources here (number of volumes, periodicals, etc. in your field), but resources really means just about anything that supports the graduate program, including endowments and grants to support student research and publications.

**Size:** There are two aspects of size that you should evaluate -- size of the program and size of the entire university. Just as with your undergraduate school, you need to find a size that feels right for you - whether to be a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond. The size of the university is important in terms of resources available (see above) and whether you like that kind of environment; more important, however, is the size the graduate program -- where you'll spend the bulk of your time. Examine the faculty/student ratios.

**State Regulations & Residency Requirements:** If you are looking at graduate programs at state universities, you need to examine admission requirements and costs for in-state residents versus all other applicants. If you have your heart set on a specific state university and you do not currently live in that state, you might consider relocating to that state and establishing residency there before applying to the graduate program.

**Surrounding Community:** You're going to have to live there for a number of years, so you better be able to at least tolerate the surrounding areas. What are you looking for -- an urban, rural, or suburban setting; do you want to live in a large city or small town?



# APPLICATIONS

**Review and keep careful track of all application requirements and deadlines** (these will vary from school to school). Be sure to complete all required applications. Some universities ask for an application to the graduate school office as well as another application to the specific graduate program.

**Solicit letters of recommendation** from those who know you and your abilities well. Most programs require at least three to sometimes five letters of recommendation. Your recommenders may be professors, research supervisors, or former employers depending on the type of graduate program you pursue.

**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 well before the application deadline, ideally giving yourself time to retake the test(s) if necessary.

**Be aware that some schools will not begin to review your application** until all of your materials are in, including your application, one or more essays or a statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, test scores, if required, all academic transcripts, and perhaps a resume or CV. Make sure to track your application materials carefully.

- **Apply early.** Many schools operate on rolling admissions, which means that they continually evaluate and admit applicants when they find them. So, if you apply after this process has begun, there will be fewer openings for that admission cycle.
- **Stay organized.** Create a calendar or spreadsheet of each program's application requirements and deadlines and track the details and any pertinent correspondence or conversations.
- If graduate admissions exams are required, **register and take the tests well before the application deadline.** The commercially available test prep books are a great way to study and practice these exams in advance. If you feel you need additional help, you can also register for test preparation classes.
- **Try to visit your top schools** and talk with faculty, students and recent graduates to learn more about the program. See if there is a specific prospective student program or if you should arrange an individual visit.





## GRADUATE SCHOOL EXAMS

Graduate programs and schools usually require you to submit admissions test scores to evaluate your readiness and preparedness for graduate-level work in a particular field. Review the test information for the appropriate exam and determine whether you want to take a preparation course or just study for the test on your own. There are study guides and workbooks available in the CDO Career Resource Library, but you will probably want to purchase one to use as you prepare. These guides are available at most book stores or online. Be sure that you take the appropriate exam well in advance so that your programs will receive your scores before application deadlines. (Note: Exams require a registration fee and additional fees to send test scores.)

Graduate School: Graduate Record Examination ([GRE](http://www.ets.org/gre/)) [www.ets.org/gre/]

Business School: Graduate Management Admission Test ([GMAT](http://www.mba.com/us)) or the **GRE**. Check with the admission office of the school. [www.mba.com/us]

Medical School: Medical College Admissions Test ([MCAT](https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/)) [https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/]

Law School: Law School Admission Test ([LSAT](http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat)) [http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat]

Dental School: Dental Admission Test ([DAT](http://www.ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test/)) [http://www.ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test/]

## RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

**Solicit letters of recommendations** from those who know you and your academic work and who will provide the strongest support for your application. Typically you will need 2 – 3 letters of recommendation. Your recommenders may be professors or employers or a combination of both depending on the type of graduate program. You may want to ask your recommender if they feel they could write you a strong recommendation – that allows them to decline if they feel their letter would not be strong.

**Give your recommenders plenty of time** to complete your letters — usually 4 – 6 weeks. Supply them with a copy of your resume, your personal essay or statement of purpose, a list of programs to which you are applying, and any forms required from each of your programs, along with clear due dates for each. Try to set up a meeting to discuss your applications in person to give your recommenders more information about your process and academic goals. Be sure to write a thank you letter to each of your recommenders, and keep them informed about your application process. They may very well be your professional colleagues in the future.

# PERSONAL ESSAY OR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**The graduate school essay or statement of purpose is the core of your application.** It will describe your interest in the program, your academic and experiential preparation in the field, and possible areas of research. Hopefully, your essay will give the admissions office a sense of who you are as a person and as a student, and some idea of your potential impact as a professional in your field. Many programs have a specific “prompt” for your essay and others just ask for a general statement of purpose. There are many resources available to assist you in writing your essay – some general and some program- or field-specific. Check [Sagehen Career Tools](#) for resources that could be helpful as you write your essay.

## **General tips for writing your statement of purpose:**

- Address your interest in the field and show how that interest has developed. Discuss your academic accomplishments and any applicable research you have done. Share your personal motivations, academic potential, long-term goals, and professional interests. Talk about why that particular program meets your unique interests.
- If there are any deficiencies in your application, be sure to address those in your essay being careful to keep it short and to the point.
- Your essay is seen as an example of your writing style. Make sure it demonstrates your best work. The personal statement is typically expected to be succinct, usually no more than two to three pages, single-spaced. Proofread carefully and ask professors, mentors, or professionals in the field to review and critique your drafts. The Writing Center and the Career Development Office also provide personal statement workshops and reviews.

# APPLICATION FEES AND FUNDING SOURCES

## **Application Fees:**

Most graduate school application fees range from \$25 to \$100, with the exception of business schools, which are often higher. Application fee waivers are sometimes available based on income. Check with the institutions' financial aid and/or admissions offices to find out about application fee waiver eligibility.

## **Institutional or Departmental Funding:**

Learn about the types of funding for your program that might be available including institutional or departmental funding, state or federal aid, and any external grants or scholarships. Ask about teaching or research assistantships and internship or practicum opportunities. Be sure to complete all state and federal financial aid forms.

## **External Funding Sources:**

Research possible grants and scholarships available in your field of study. Key resources available in the CDO Library include:

### **Directory of Research Grants:**

Contains listings of over five thousand grant programs, including descriptions of the program, requirements, contact information, etc. Also contains a guide for grant proposal writing, steps to finding and applying for grants, and more.

**Scholarships, Grants & Prizes by Peterson's.**

Provides up-to-date details on millions of privately funded awards valued at billions of dollars. Contains profiles of thousands of awards based on ethnic heritage, talent, employment experience, military service, and many other categories that are available from private sources such as foundations, corporations, and religious and civic organizations.

**The Grants Register.**

Contains listings of grants, listed alphabetically by the name of the organization and including details on subject value, length of study, purpose, country of study, numbers offered, and more; also contains subject/eligibility guide to awards and more.

**Online Resources:**

There are many searchable funding databases available on the web. Search using Sagehen Career Tools or based on general or specific program or research interests.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):**

If you are studying within the US, apply for FAFSA. Many states and colleges use your FAFSA data to determine your eligibility for state and school aid, and some private financial aid providers may use your FAFSA information to determine whether you qualify for their aid.

## TRANSCRIPTS

**All graduate and professional programs/application services require official transcripts** from EVERY post-secondary institution you have attended. Contact the registrar's office early; allow at least four weeks for your request(s) to be processed sent to the recipients. A nominal fee is usually charged for transcript requests.

# FINAL NOTES

*You can often improve your chances of grad school admission by doing the following:*

- Study journals to identify faculty who are doing cutting-edge work in the field that interests *you*.
- Write to those faculty and tell them that you have read and are interested in their work, and that you plan to apply to their program. Mention your specific areas of interest *and possible research topics*.
- Send a copy of your research papers and tell them that you'd like to work for them if *you are accepted*.
- In many instances, faculty with whom you have networked will advocate on your behalf to *the program admissions committee*.

## ACCEPTING AND DECLINING OFFERS

**You may be notified by phone or in writing that you have been accepted for admission** or that you are a waitlist alternate. Consider the following in making your decisions:



- As soon as you have acceptances from your primary schools, decide which one is better for you and notify the others of your decision not to accept their offers.
- One method for dealing with making your final decision is fairly simple. When you have received two acceptances, decide which of the two is best for you and send a letter to the other school letting them know of your decision. Repeat this comparison and decision process as you receive each new offer.
- As soon as you have a satisfactory offer from your most preferred school, accept it and inform the other schools to which you have applied of your decision. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness in opening the way for another student.
- After you have accepted, do not take your commitment lightly. Reneging on your decision for anything other than a very serious new development may negatively affect your reputation with other institutions and with your sponsors/recommenders.
- Some schools may require a deposit after you accept their offer.



## TEN THINGS TO DO IF YOU DON'T GET IN

1. Apply earlier (avoid the last six weeks before the deadline).
2. Get volunteer or internship experiences in the targeted field (even part-time, even unpaid).
3. Work in a "real job" in the targeted field (there's no substitute for actual experience, and recommendations from supervisors in the profession).
4. Apply to more schools (six is considered a minimum: two safety schools, two middle of the road schools, and two reach schools).
5. Broaden your applications to include more safety schools (even 4.0 students can and do get rejected).
6. Visit the schools, correspond with the faculty and wow 'em.
7. Take a class in the targeted subject and wow 'em (remember: your most recent grades count the most).
8. Go to summer school in the targeted subject and wow 'em (it's easy to get into summer school, even at Harvard).
9. Get an intermediate degree to demonstrate your commitment to the field (a post-bac credential or master's degree) if your goal is a doctoral degree.
10. Get older and more experienced and try again (many times, that's all it takes).

**Grad school can be a wonderful and rewarding move.** Contact the staff in the CDO to discuss your goals and begin to work on your decisions and application process. We look forward to working with you!



# GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION TIMELINE FOR STUDENTS

**Use this timetable as a general guideline** to review your progress as you consider graduate school. Recheck this timetable each semester to make sure that you are on track as you plan for graduate school.

## Junior Year

- With the help of your faculty advisor, select courses beyond the general college requirements that will enhance your graduate school preparation.
- Note your professors' research areas. Get in touch with those professors whose research interests you and investigate ways in which you can get involved in learning more about it.
- Try to talk to recent alumni who are now graduate students. Ask them what graduate student life is like, what kind of study load you can expect in their specialties, which professors can provide detailed information about graduate school, and which professors you should work with on research projects. The CDO's Sagehen Career Connection database can assist you in targeting such alumni.
- Begin preparation and register for the appropriate graduate school entrance test(s). By taking these tests in the Spring of your Junior year, you will have the opportunity to retake the test if you are disappointed with your scores.

## Beginning of Senior Year

- Check with the Registrar and your major advisor to confirm your eligibility for graduation
- Work with faculty who are knowledgeable about graduate schools in your areas of study. Bring copies of your transcript and resume so they can recommend schools that best match your interests.
- Research graduate programs in your field(s) of interest. The CDO has several resources that will be helpful as you explore options.
- Request bulletins, brochures, assistantship information, financial aid forms, and department application forms from schools that you are considering.
- Register for and take (in October or November) the required grad school exam(s) if you have not previously taken it or if you need to improve your scores. Remember scores are not immediately available after you have taken the test – it often takes up to 6 weeks to get them. Plan ahead!
- With the help of the CDO staff, prepare a resume to supplement your graduate study and assistantship application. Work with the Graduate Fellowship Office to identify and apply for fellowships.
- Request a student copy of your transcript from each undergraduate institution you have attended. Check for errors since any changes may take weeks. Don't wait until the application deadline to do this! You may either miss the deadline or be forced to submit an incomplete transcript.

## **October/November of Senior Year**

- Narrow down your list of possible schools. Check the application deadline for each school.
- Graduate schools generally require from three to five letters of recommendation. Remember to ask professors and supervisors for these early!
- Begin working on your personal statements and other required essays.
- Request that your graduate test results be sent to all schools to which you have applied.

## **November/December of Senior Year**

- Prepare final copies of application materials. Include a photocopy of your entrance test results if you have them. Everything should be mailed at least one week before the deadline. Be sure to include the necessary fees with your applications.
- Have the Registrar's Office send your transcript to all institutions to which you are applying.

## **January-April of Senior Year**

- Prior to deadlines, call to verify that application materials, references, transcripts, etc., were received.
- If you receive test results after your applications have been submitted, forward those on to each school.
- Carefully consider the options available and make your decision.
- Remember to check out Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](https://fafsa.ed.gov/)) and apply before the deadline at <https://fafsa.ed.gov/>.

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