Is Graduate School For Me?
A UCD Communication Major’s Guide

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What do I want from the program?

Graduate school is not for the faint hearted! We do not recommend graduate school as a delay strategy for those who are unsure about their prospects for “the real world.” Instead, ask yourself about your goals and needs. If you are seeking to be a professor or head into an academic job, an “academic” program would suit your needs. If you are looking to bolster your professional skills, a “professional” or “technical” or “management” degree might work best for you. Sometimes, programs offer executive certificates that could give your career a boost while taking less time than a full degree program.

2. How will I finance it? Where do I want to go?

Graduate school can be costly! Even applying to graduate schools can rack up the bills. While a small percentage of students with strong academic records will be able to earn teaching assistantships, fellowships, or scholarships to help pay for school; other students will need to finance the entire degree. Sources of financing range from employee tuition programs to student loans. A first step will be to research options for paying for your degree and establish a budget. Considering location is important too. While many students want to stay at their undergraduate institutions, we recommend a broader search. Exposure to new ideas will come from new programs. On the other hand, relocating is costly too!

Steps

1. Talk to your favorite professors. At least a year or two before you plan to apply, begin to talk to current professors about your capacity for graduate study. Ask them to be honest about your abilities and weigh the pros and cons of graduate study with you. Seek their recommendations about appropriate programs.

2. Strengthen your profile. Begin to assemble a research and writing portfolio of class projects. Sign up for internships and service opportunities. In short, try to make yourself into the best candidate you can. This is also a good time to sign up for preparation classes for any exams (GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.) that you may need to take.

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Search http://www.gradschools.com/ for more information about programs. See http://www.ets.org/gre/ to learn more about the GRE.
Steps continued . . .

3. Research potential programs in terms of fields of study and geographical area. Read everything you can about possible programs online. Check application deadlines, admission requirements, program requirements, program emphases, and financial aid packages. Consider what sort of place the department seems to be. Can you envision yourself there?

4. Contact the Director of Graduate Studies. If you have a good feeling for the program, you can skip this step. But if questions linger, contact the director of graduate studies and inquire about their expectations. Ask them what a successful application typically looks like. You may also ask to meet current graduate students. You might ask about job placement records and opportunities for research or internships.

5. Submit a stellar applicant package. Make sure your resume and cover letter, writing samples, and other written work reflect your best effort. They should be thoughtful, carefully prepared, and tailored to the individual program. Be sure your cover letter speaks explicitly about how you see yourself fitting into the program. You need to be very clear in outlining your goals for the program. Line up recommendation letter writers early and remind them of deadlines. Often, you will need to apply to graduate school a year to a semester in advance, so begin to research application deadlines now.

Questions continued . . .

3. Do I Have the Necessary Skills? In order to be admitted, graduate schools often require GPA’s above 3.0 and certain minimum scores on standardized tests such as the GRE. Once admitted, the expectations can be much higher than for the undergraduate degree. Longer hours, harder reading, and more challenging assignments are required. You may wish to talk to current graduate students of programs you are interested in to get an idea of how it differs from the undergraduate experience.

4. Who Can Help Me? Career counselors, your favorite professors, and graduate directors are good resources.

Resources


Robert L. Peters, Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student’s Guide to Earning a Master’s or a Ph.D. Noonday, 1997+.
Notes: