

APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Timetable

As you get closer to the actual process of applying to graduate school, pay very close attention to timetables. Application deadlines vary from institution to institution and range from a year to a few months prior to enrollment. Most universities have an application deadline; a few allow year-round applications but may require a waiting period before enrollment. In addition, application deadlines at some universities vary by department, with acceptance into the department preceding acceptance into the graduate school division of the university.

As a general rule, most applicants begin preparations for the process the summer prior to their senior year.

Don't forget to determine deadlines for financial aid applications, which are often different from department application deadlines. Most graduate schools require applicants to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to determine aid eligibility. Some schools may require additional information; therefore, be sure to check with each school you're considering for specifics.

Entrance Exams

Entrance exams are another reality of the application process. The most common exam is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Other specialized tests include the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), and the Dental Aptitude Test (DAT). Certain graduate programs also require the GRE Subject Test.

Find information about all tests online at the following locations:

GRE: www.ets.org GMAT: <http://www.mba.com> MAT: www.milleranalogies.com
LSAT: <http://www.lsac.org/> MCAT: <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/> DAT: <http://www.ada.org/prof/ed/testing/dat/index.asp>

When to Take the Entrance Exams

Students frequently ask two questions about entrance exams: "Should I take the exam now even though I may not attend graduate school for a few years?" and "How important are my scores to my admission?"

In answer to the first question, most institutions accept scores within five years of the testing date. So even if you're uncertain about your plans to attend graduate school right away, consider taking the entrance exams now, while you're at the top of your academic game mind and in test-taking mode. This is particularly good advice if you're fairly certain you'll apply to grad school in the next two to three years.

If you have very little idea when you plan to attend graduate school, consider delaying the time, cost, and pressures involved in taking entrance exams until you're more certain of your plans. Since various schools require different exams, it might be a good idea to wait until you've narrowed your field of potential programs before you decide which entrance exams to take.

How Important are the Scores?

Most graduate schools use standardized test scores as an initial screening device.

Some institutions even set a cutoff score, and any applicants whose scores fall below the cutoff are omitted from the pool. Some graduate school directories provide information concerning ranges or averages of scores for their previously accepted classes; if you're able to gather this sort of information, you'll have a good idea what score to shoot for, and how you'll compare to other applicants.

Many schools consider standardized test scores in combination with your GPA and academic record. Most universities are aware of undergraduate programs that offer quality education and view students' academic records accordingly. As a Valparaiso University student, you will likely benefit from Valpo's strong reputation.

When registering and preparing for an entrance exam, carefully compare testing dates and application deadlines, and make sure you'll have time to get the scores to the school or schools of your choice.

Preparing for the Exams

Spending time (and money, in some cases) to prepare for entrance exams is always worthwhile. The amount of time you spend, and the prep methods you use, should depend on the amount of time you have before the exam. The best place to start is on the website specific to the test you'll be taking—for example, www.gre.org for the GRE. The sites offer an abundance of information, including sample tests. A variety of other options are available: online prep guides available on test websites, commercially-produced study guides, and preparatory courses such as Kaplan and Princeton Review.

The following are essential prep activities:

- Familiarize yourself with types of questions you'll encounter on the exam. Look for patterns that may help you be a more efficient test taker.
- Estimate your performance. (Generally speaking, you can expect your score to be close to your SAT score).
- Learn everything you can about the nature and format of the exam. Being unfamiliar with the format can cost you valuable time when actually taking the test.
- Work through several sample tests. These are widely available through the testing websites and through commercially-prepared prep manuals. Always be sure to time yourself to see how you'd perform under actual testing conditions.

Evaluating Your Test Results

If your final test results fall short of your goals, *and if you believe you could improve your performance*, you may want to consider re-taking the test. Even though retest scores appear on the score report, many programs consider only the most recent score. Moreover, a repeated or improved score probably won't harm your standing in the applicant pool.

Don't make the mistake, however, of going into one of these exams unprepared.

Simply retaking a test *without significant preparation* is very unlikely to have a positive impact on your scores.

The Essay

Another time-consuming and demanding part of the application process is writing an essay or personal statement. The essay is opportunity for you to distinguish

yourself from your peers in the applicant pool, and to share information about yourself with the admissions committee. For this reason, essays should clearly written, concise (a 500-word limit is common) and distinctive. Most committees review hundreds of applications, so be sure to include your own voice, and try to include something memorable in your essay.

The good news is that most applications ask a broad, open-ended question pertaining to your desire to complete a graduate degree. As a result, you'll most likely be able to use the same essay (with minor adjustments, of course) for most applications. Visit the Career Center website for guidelines for writing your personal essay: www.valpo.edu/career.

Of course, grammar and punctuation must be flawless. Always proofread vigilantly, and give yourself plenty of time to work through several drafts. Ask a friend or family to read your essay to see if it makes sense. Consulting with the staff at the Writing Center in the Christopher Center is also very good idea. Finally, ask your professors to read and suggest ways to strengthen your essays. Remember: they have first-hand experience writing admissions essays, and they may have also served on admissions committees.

Letters of Recommendation

Your final task in the application process is gathering letters of recommendation. A requirement of three to five recommendations is typical. Your best resources are individuals most familiar with and supportive of your academic training. Depending on the competitive nature of the program or programs you are applying to, you might ask for recommendations from individuals who are well-known, frequently published, or well-connected in your field. If possible, select an individual who graduated from the program you're applying to. (Faculty degrees and the granting institutions are listed in the Valparaiso General Catalog.)

Identify as many individuals as necessary and personally contact them to ask for a recommendation. Be considerate of their hectic schedules, and always allow plenty of time for them to compose and send a letter. This means several weeks or a month, not just a few days.

If you have any doubts about the recommendation an individual may give you, negotiate this potentially awkward situation by being direct. Politely ask the person if s/he feels comfortable writing a positive letter of recommendation for you. Look for an immediate and enthusiastic response, but don't misinterpret a thoughtful response as hesitation.

Once you have a list of recommenders, make their jobs as easy as possible. Be sure to provide all the necessary information for delivering their recommendation forms promptly, including stamped, addressed envelopes and a complete list of deadlines. You might also want to include a list of deadlines, as well as a resume, especially for those people who might benefit from having more detailed information about you.

An important note: As a general rule, always waive your right to review a letter. Most institutions put more trust in a letter they know you have not seen.

These items—the essay, letters of recommendation, test scores, and the school's standard graduate school application form—are the fundamental ingredients in your admission file. Most institutions require that your file be complete by the application deadline in order to be considered for the following enrollment period. While some

schools keep you informed of the status of your file by sending postcards, don't depend on this courtesy. Instead, take personal responsibility for staying on top of your application materials and confirming that the schools have received all the necessary information. Don't hesitate to contact the appropriate office periodically to check on the status of your application.

Initial Application Submissions

Another question students commonly ask is how many schools they should apply to. Financial resources are probably the most important factor when making this decision. With application fees averaging between \$50 and \$75, applying to graduate schools is a very expensive proposition.

In addition, writing essays and applications, as well as making your final decision, is a very time-consuming process. For this reason, submitting twenty or thirty applications at one time is simply not feasible for most students, not to mention the decision-making process you'll encounter if you're accepted at many of the schools.

Instead, use careful and thorough research to narrow your choices to ten or fewer programs. See the "Rule of Thumb" that follows for some guidelines.

Rule of Thumb

Identify two or three institutions that you would love to attend, but that may be somewhat beyond your qualifications. Then select four or five quality institutions that are well within your range of qualifications. Finally, choose one or two "safety schools"—i.e. institutions where you feel sure you'll be accepted, but that would also meet your standards. This process will result in a list of seven to ten programs for your initial application process—enough to create some degree of choice and still be financially feasible.

The Interview

An on-site interview for graduate school is similar to an on-site interview for permanent employment. So that you can effectively discuss what you are able to contribute to and hope to gain from a graduate program, use tools of self assessment.

For example, spend time in advance of the interview preparing yourself to discuss your abilities, career interests, weaknesses, and short- and long-term goals. Also be ready to talk about your academic qualifications, your sense of purpose, your commitment to goals, and how you think these things will make you a successful graduate student.

Though there are no set guidelines for graduate school interviews, if you've spent time considering why you want a graduate degree, your goals, and your abilities, you should be ready for most interview situations. As with any interview, always try to be yourself.

For more information about interviewing, stop by the Career Center and pick up a copy of our Interviewing booklet.

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