



OGLETHORPE
CAREER SERVICES

GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

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Is Graduate School Right for Me?

Graduate and professional schools are a large commitment in terms of time and labor, and the decision to enter a particular program requires careful deliberation and assessment of career goals and academic interests. Many factors should weigh into the decision, and we recommend that you seek advice from faculty, alumni and others in order to decide if a particular course of study is right for you.

There are **academic** degrees (M.A., M.S., Ph.D.) which typically involve original research and writing a thesis, and there are **professional** degrees in business (M.B.A.), medicine (M.D.), law (J.D.), education (M.Ed.), fine arts (M.F.A.), public policy (M.P.P.), social work (M.S.W.) and others.

Attending a graduate or professional school is a good decision provided that you have conducted sufficient research, obtained a clear understanding of your goals and expectations, and that you are realistically prepared. Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to evaluate your reasons for seeking a graduate or professional degree and to find a program that best suits your academic needs and interests. There are many factors to take into consideration, and it is often easier to begin weighing your graduate school decision by conducting a personal assessment and by speaking with faculty members and alumni.

Personal Assessment

Before making the decision to attend graduate school, take some time to learn more about yourself and your motives for seeking a graduate or professional degree. By carefully outlining your goals, talents, and abilities, you can avoid the frustration of choosing a school or program that is not in your best interest. To begin your assessment, start by asking yourself the following questions. Feel free to record your answers and share them with your career counselor, faculty advisor or whomever is assisting you in your decision.

- What are my short-term and long-term career goals? Where do I see myself in five years? Ten years? Where does graduate study fit into these goals?
- Do I have a passion for a particular subject or combination of disciplines? What are my skills and strengths? Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake such an extensive commitment?
- Do I have other needs or obligations that conflict with attending a graduate or professional degree program? Will I need to take out loans? How is the job outlook for my prospective field or industry?
- What type of value do I place on a graduate degree? Am I going to graduate school to please others? Am I using graduate school as a means to avoid seeking employment?

Faculty

Faculty members and your pre-professional advisors are among the best sources of graduate and professional school information. They possess tremendous knowledge in their areas of study, and they are abreast on current issues and trends facing their industry or field. Faculty members can give you information about their graduate institution(s), and most are happy to share their experiences as graduate students with you. They can help you locate programs that suit your needs and interests, and they can help you decide whether a master's or Ph.D. program is best. Also, your professors can give you valuable contact information of faculty

members at other institutions, and on some occasions, they may even contact a friend or colleague on your behalf. While interviewing faculty members, consider asking the following questions:

- What is your background? Where did you obtain your graduate degree(s)? Why did you choose this particular program or institution? What was your experience like?
- How did you make your way into this field? What career options can you pursue with this degree?
- Should I go to graduate school right away or take time off to work for a year or two? What kinds of work experiences are preferable?
- Who else should I see/call/write for further graduate school advice? Can you recommend other faculty members at Oglethorpe or elsewhere who may be willing to give me additional information?

Note: ALWAYS ask this last question or something like it, and remember to follow up when a professor shares his or her contact information with you.

Alumni

OU Alumni are also an excellent resource for graduate and professional school advice. Contacting the Alumni Office can connect with you with many resources that might help you in your research. For example, you can locate alumni who are professionals in your field of interest, or who might be attending a graduate school that you are thinking of applying to. Alumni are usually happy to give you information on their programs and what the transition from Oglethorpe to graduate school is like. Alumni can tell you which degree or combination of degrees is helpful for the work they do or if a graduate or professional degree is necessary.

- When arranging informational interviews with OU alumni, be sure to sample more than one opinion. Here are some questions you may want to ask:
- What has been your career progression? Why did you choose this particular graduate program? How do you feel about your decision to pursue graduate studies?
- How does one typically move through your field or industry? What types of degrees or credentials are preferable? How has graduate school fed into your long-term goals?
- How did your OU education prepare you for graduate school? How is graduate school different from college? What courses do you recommend I take? What journals/magazines do you suggest I read?
- Who else should I write/call for further advice?

Note: If you need any help with arranging informational interviews, contact Career Services or refer to our Informational Interviewing and Networking handout.

Selecting the Right Program

Finding the right graduate or professional program requires a great deal of research and thought. You do not want to waste time, money, and energy applying to schools that do not provide a good fit. When building your list of potential schools, you should consult several sources of information. Your sources should include (at a minimum) your professors, Sewanee alumni, and the graduate institutions that you are targeting. You may also choose to consult PhDs.org's ranking tool, *U.S. News and World Report*; *America's Best Graduate Schools*, *Peterson's Guide to Graduate Schools*, and other helpful resources located in duPont Library, the Career & Leadership Development library or online.

When investigating graduate and professional institutions, remember to make several contacts at each school. It is important to contact the faculty members who share your interests or who may be future advisors. Feel free to ask questions about their research, what they teach, and how their program operates. If you are unsure about how to contact faculty members, consult with your professors or refer to Don Asher's book, *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice*. Also consider contacting students currently enrolled in your targeted program and ask them to share their thoughts about the institution, the professors, the quality of student life, and any other information that you would like to know.

Building a list of contacts can be a little overwhelming if you are not organized. Your research will go much easier if you keep all of your correspondence in order and if you plan ahead. Professors, students and admissions staff can be very busy, and you will need to give your contacts plenty of time to respond to your questions and concerns. When writing to these individuals, remember to be polite, concise and appreciative. Also, remember to follow up with your contacts in a prompt manner.

The following is a list of considerations that you might want to investigate:

The Program

- What is the reputation of the program? Is it nationally recognized? Regionally? Locally?
- What are the requirements for a master's degree? Ph.D.?
- How long does it typically take students to obtain their degree?
- How flexible is the program? Full-time? Part-time?
- What types of internship, externship, or research opportunities are available?
- Is the academic environment highly competitive? Supportive?
- What types of facilities are available to graduate students? How extensive is the library? How up to date is the computer or laboratory equipment?
- What is the size of the program? Institution?
- What is the student to faculty ratio? Do students receive personal attention?
- What is the relative makeup of the student body? How many minority groups are represented? What is the ratio of men to women? Are there international students in the program?

Faculty

- Are there any faculty members who are recognized leaders in the field?
- Are the faculty members widely published? Where are they published? Note: You should consider reading some of the research of professors prior to contacting them.

- What is the quality of their research?
- Are there faculty members who share your research interests?
- Are the faculty members good educators?
- How diverse is the faculty?

Campus Community

- Where is the geographic location? Urban? Rural? How far away is the institution from family and other loved ones? Can you live in this type of area for the time it will take to complete your degree?
- What types of student organizations are available? Are there opportunities for campus involvement outside the program? Clubs? Intramural sports?
- What type of housing is available? Do you have the option of living on campus?
- What is the community atmosphere like? Are there opportunities to socialize?
- What is the quality of student support services? Does the institution have a good career services office? What type and how much assistance is offered to jobseekers?

Financial Assistance

- What are the tuition costs?
- What types of funding and support are available? Research assistantships? Teaching Assistantships? Fellowships?
- Approximately what percent of the student body receives funding and support?

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Oglethorpe University faculty members write numerous letters of recommendation each year on behalf of current and former students. Request an appointment two to three months in advance of your deadline to discuss your plans. Be sure to ask your potential recommender if he or she feels comfortable writing you a **strong** letter of recommendation. You may receive "no" as the answer; if so, move on and ask someone else.

Here are the materials you should provide to those who write your letters of recommendation:

- A preliminary list of the graduate programs you are considering
- Your transcript
- Copies of two or three graded papers or projects that represent the quality of your work
- Your statement of purpose (which the recommender should be asked to critique)
- Your resume or C.V.
- A brief list of what *you* think would be most important for a graduate program to know about you
- Clear instructions for submitting the letter and stamped, addressed envelopes if the letters will not be submitted electronically
- When you need the letters submitted

Writing a Personal Statement

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement -- often called a "statement of purpose," "personal statement," or "letter of intent"-- as a part of the application. Some statements require rather specific information--for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to 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
- Determine the content of your statement
- Determine your approach and style of the statement
- Words and phrases to avoid without explanation
- Where to go for help

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. Whatever its purpose, 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) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of 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 any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses 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 more appropriate to discuss this outside of the personal statement.

- **Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 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.

DO

- 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 general 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 of what you have done, 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 and phrases to avoid without explanation

significant	enjoyable/enjoy	meant a lot to me	I like helping people
interesting	feel good	stimulating	remarkable
challenging	appealing to me	incredible	rewarding
satisfying/satisfaction	appealing aspect	gratifying	useful
appreciate	I like it	fascinating	valuable
invaluable	it's important	meaningful	helpful
exciting/excited	I can contribute	helping people	

Where to go for help

- If you need some help figuring out what to write, make an appointment with a Career Center counselor to come up with a plan.
- Once you have done a draft (or 2 or 3), show it to people you trust such as faculty, GSIs, family, friends, letter of recommendation writers, etc. The best people to review your statement are those who know you well and have excellent writing skills.
- If you want to improve your writing, the Academic Success Center offers programs on writing technique as well as individual tutoring.
- www.statementofpurpose.com is an excellent resource that includes essay critiques and writing tips.

Suggested Timeline

Below is a suggested timeline for applying to graduate school if you plan to go the semester following graduation. Please note: you may need to adjust this timeline to meet various deadlines of the programs you apply to, so be sure to note each program's application deadline.

Spring Semester Junior Year

- Research program options and requirements. Make a target list of schools you are interested in and a list of requirements/deadlines.
- Make plans to take required standardized tests and begin studying. If you are not pleased with your score, plan to take it again in the fall. Many schools will take the best score.

Summer Before Senior Year

- Research program options and requirements. Make a target list of schools you are interested in and a list of requirements/deadlines.
- Make plans to take required standardized tests and begin studying.
- Write a draft of your personal statement.

August-September

- Meet with faculty members in your department to discuss your personal statement and possible programs to consider.
- Determine the schools to which you will apply. Research fellowships and financial assistance.
- Get organized. Create a file for each school and keep all application materials together.
- Take standardized tests and request that your scores be sent to appropriate schools.

October

- Take standardized tests and request that your scores be sent to appropriate schools.
- Complete your personal statement.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty; provide a copy of your personal statement and resume/CV to each professor.
- Order transcripts and request official copies be sent to schools to which you are applying.

November

- Complete applications. Have someone review before you send.
- Mail applications (if not web-based) one month in advance of deadline. Pay close attention to instructions.
- Give your recommenders appropriate information needed to mail/submit letters. Remind your recommenders of when the letters must be received.
- Make copies of all applications for your records.

January

- Confirm all materials have been received.
- Contact schools about a campus visit.

April

- Mail acceptance forms and, if required, deposits.
- Notify schools that you will not be attending after making your decision.
- Send thank you letters to those who wrote your recommendations. Be sure to let them know where you're going to school.

Graduate School Testing

In most cases, you will need to take some sort of standardized test to gain admission into a graduate or professional degree program. If you are unsure about what test(s) you need to take, contact the admission office of the school you are targeting. As soon as you are aware of the testing required, you should investigate when and where the test is offered and how much the test will cost. Also, you should begin to familiarize yourself with the overall makeup of the test. Throughout your preparation, you should review the information covered in the test and take at least one practice test under timed conditions. If you need any additional help with your test preparation, you can take advantage of resources in the career services library and other services including:

Practice Tests

Many graduate school applicants familiarize themselves with test directions and question types, practice with sample tests, and study information on test-taking techniques and strategies. Very few testers achieve their full potential without some preparation and practice. Candidates should be familiar with test instructions and question types. Practice tests are available on-line at www.gre.org, www.lsac.org and www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm

Other options

Several graduate school test preparation companies offer online courses as well as classroom courses. None of these companies is affiliated with Oglethorpe University. A few options are:

[Princeton Review](#) is a national company that offers LSAT prep in Atlanta and a variety of other test preparation courses on-line.

[Kaplan](#) is a national company that offers a wide selection of test preparation courses on-line and in Atlanta, including graduate and professional, medicine and health sciences and English/TOEFL.

Graduate School Funding

- Check Oglethorpe's listing of Post Graduate Scholarships:
<http://www.oglethorpe.edu/academics/undergraduate/postgraduatescholarships.asp>
- [Foundation Grants to Individuals](#)
- U. S. Department of Education's [Student Guide to Financial Aid](#)
- [FastWeb](#) database of scholarships