

# APPENDIX C

Graduate

school:

a closer

look



By Thomas Q. Reeve, *Continuing Education Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Peace Corps, 1994).

## Motivation

**R**emember that advanced education is usually not an end in itself. It is, instead, a means to an end because graduate and professional schools are career-development institutions. To begin or sustain certain careers, advanced training is a must. For example, to enter the practice of law, one must go to law school (and pass a state bar exam). Public health professionals usually need a Master's in Public Health degree to get their first job, and few university professors could get or keep a job without a doctorate. Some professionals—school teachers and federal government employees, for example—pursue specialized master's degrees to gain expertise, promotions, and salary increases.

One point is vital: If you attend graduate school, it is essential to choose one with a program suited to your career goals—which you

should be clear about before beginning a graduate program. Deciding to go to graduate or professional school is a big decision that can lead to quality education and entry into a profession or career of your choice. Made with too little thought, however, the same decision could lead you to drop out of school. In such an event, not only would you lack an advanced degree, but you would also have to pay off unnecessary educational debt.

Think carefully about your reasons for going to graduate and professional school. Graduate education and professional training can be a long haul, and sometimes the only thing that sustains you will be your long-term motivation. Thus, every hour you spend examining your intellectual interests, your skills, and your professional goals will pay off in the end.

There is a final reason to clarify career goals before applying to graduate or professional school. The graduate admission process itself is designed to probe and examine career motivations. Your chances of acceptance will be greater if you appear purposeful and likely to graduate and pursue a career for which the school prepares its students.

## Degrees and Certificates

Graduate and professional schools offer a bewildering array of degrees and certificates. You will probably also find a great variety in the career value of these differing degrees. Take time to thoroughly investigate the type of degree you wish to pursue. Specialized graduate programs offer specialized degrees for specific career paths. Thus, you need to know the "alphabet soup" of

higher education degrees to make the best informed decision about the type of degree to pursue and about the schools to which to apply.

What follows are commonly accepted generalizations about advanced degrees, but keep in mind that there are as many exceptions as there are graduate programs. Therefore, as you research graduate education options, research thoroughly the career impact of the specific degree.

## MASTER'S DEGREE

Many people considering graduate school are thinking of some type of master's degree. Normally, it takes about two years of full-time course work to achieve this degree. Two types of master's degrees are tied to the doctoral pathway—the Master of Arts (M.A.) and the Master of Science (M.S.). These often serve as transitional degrees that must be awarded before a graduate student can formally advance to the doctoral pathway. Such degrees are routinely awarded in academic disciplines—political science, literature, chemistry, biology, history, physics, anthropology, etc.

There are also master's degree programs outside the doctoral pathway that are designed to put the student on the path toward a successful career. About two-thirds of the 300,000 master's degrees awarded yearly are professional master's degrees. These are career degrees in their own right. For example, someone thinking of a career in local or county government would pursue a Master of Public Administration, focusing on a course of study in city government, criminal justice administration, or some other field.

In some cases, a specialized advanced degree is necessary before a person can take a licensing exam. The Master of Social Work (M.S.W.), for example, is often a requirement for someone wishing to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (L.C.S.W.). And it is virtually impossible to become a practicing librarian without at least a Master of Library Science (M.L.S) degree.

## PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATE

Often earned by four-year college graduates, professional certificates provide specific training in certain fields—such as information systems, publications, and financial management. Many legal assistants, for example, earn a professional certificate before entering the field. Professional certificate programs generally take one to two years to complete.

## DOCTORATE

Requiring about seven years to complete after the B.A., the doctorate often takes the form of the Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy). The most common type of doctoral degree, the Ph.D. is the degree of choice for people who wish to become professional teachers and/or researchers in higher education, industry, and government. The decision to pursue a doctorate is not one to take lightly, as the degree will take several years to complete and will cost a lot of money. (Check out the detailed information about the AmeriCorps education award in Appendix A.)

## Locating and Selecting the Best Programs

For help in finding a graduate school and/or professional program that fits your needs, you can look to a variety of resources. Friends, former professors, and knowledgeable professionals in your chosen field may have useful suggestions and recommendations. You can consult publications like Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study, a comprehensive six-volume reference to graduate and professional schools, that contain useful descriptions of individual programs organized by field of study, degrees awarded, costs, size of faculty, entrance requirements, and application deadlines. In some cases, the percentage of applicants accepted is also published. You will also find phone numbers and addresses for the director, chairperson, dean, or program office. Look for this resource at well-stocked community libraries, career centers, and college/university libraries.

In addition to career information, occupational and professional associations sometimes publish information about graduate and professional schools in their particular fields. For example, the American Psychological Association publishes annually its own guide, *Graduate Study in Psychology and Related Field*. A telephone call or letter of inquiry to an occupational or professional association in a chosen career field will often get you a list of books and pamphlets available from the association. To identify phone numbers and addresses of such organizations, check the *Encyclopedia of Associations* (Detroit: Gale Research Co.).

Because the quality of a graduate program will reflect the quality of its faculty, you need to look carefully at the faculties of schools you're considering. Find out who these people are, and check their research interests and reputations. Having an idea of who you'd like to study with can strongly influence your decision of where to apply. Other factors to consider include the overall quality of students accepted to the program, library holdings in the field of study, laboratory facilities, and job-placement assistance. You will have criteria yourself, as well.

To maximize your chances for acceptance, it is wise to apply to a range of programs. In doing so, however, try not to underestimate yourself and your prospects by applying to programs and schools beneath your ability and qualifications. Generally speaking, the better the graduate or professional program, the better the career opportunities of its advanced-degree holders. Prestige of degree often counts when seeking that first entry-level position after leaving graduate or professional school. There is no substitute for excellence.

In some of the more popular fields, national rankings of graduate and professional schools and departments have been published in the popular or trade press. Be somewhat cautious when using these resources, however, because often only the very best and most competitive schools of national ranking are listed. Thus, you might exclude many outstanding local or regional universities from your consideration.

In the end, the task of ranking programs of interest will fall upon you. Seek out the opinions of knowledgeable professionals in the

field. Also, feel free to consult with the people who control admission to a specific program; ask them how they would rank other programs in their field. If at all possible, visit campuses and seek out program faculty and staff. Currently enrolled students can give useful advice as well. Ask to sit in on a class or two. If the school is too far away to visit, call program staff members and faculty to ask questions not addressed in the informational material the program sends out. Finally, resourceful applicants may wish to call program alumni to assess the value of their training and the impact of the degree in the job market.

## Applications, Deadlines, and Procrastination

Around Labor Day, most graduate and professional schools are ready to mail out applications and informational materials for the following (not upcoming) academic year. Therefore, request application materials in the late summer or early autumn of the year *before* you wish to enter a graduate program. Fill out the application carefully, typing it or completing it on a computer if at all possible. It

can take weeks for an application, collegiate transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation to trickle into a graduate admission office. So plan ahead!

For programs that begin in the following fall term, application deadlines will generally be between December and February. Admission letters (offers) usually go out in mid-March and later for programs with December to February application deadlines. April 15 is the generally recognized date after which graduate schools expect to receive replies to admission offers.

The most common mistake applicants make is failing to apply well ahead of the deadline. In fact, the majority of applications will arrive just before the deadline. What most people do not realize is that the deadline is not the preferred application date; rather, it is the last possible moment to apply. People who procrastinate can harm their chances for admission.

The best approach is to mail applications a month before the deadline. This allows time to resolve any last minute problems: late-arriving letters of recommendation, a form filled out incorrectly, a tardy transcript, and so on.

### Information/Sources/Graduate School Admission Exams

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)  
(609) 771-7670 (Princeton, N.J.)  
(510) 873-8100 (Oakland, Calif.)  
[www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)

Law School Admission Test (LSAT)  
(215) 968-1001  
[www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)  
(202) 828-0690  
[www.acmc.org](http://www.acmc.org)

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)  
[www.gmat.org](http://www.gmat.org)

Early applications receive more careful consideration than those arriving close to the deadline. By recognizing that admission and administrative staff are overworked close to application deadlines, wise applicants position their paperwork to arrive at a time when it will get the best consideration.

### Letters of Recommendation

Normally, graduate and professional schools will ask each applicant to arrange for letters of recommendation (usually three). Application packages sent by the graduate school usually contain recommendation forms and sometimes include self-addressed envelopes. The applicant fills out part of the form and then gives it to the person who is to write the recommendation. Because the letter writer is often expected to mail the letter directly to the graduate program, the applicant should provide the writer with a stamped envelope addressed to the graduate or professional school.

In cases where someone is applying to many graduate schools, recommenders may have to write several letters. Often, applicants hesitate to ask this, thinking that their request may seem burdensome to the letter writer. But it's really not as burdensome as one may think. Word processors have greatly facilitated the writing of letters and the production of personalized copies. It is helpful to give the letter-writer a copy of the final draft of the statement of purpose (see next section) you will send to the graduate school.

Letters of recommendation, which are read carefully by admission committees, are a critical component of an application dossier. So,

these letters should be written by people well acquainted with your intellectual abilities and skills. In the final analysis, it is better to request a letter from someone lower in the academic or work hierarchy, who knows you well, than to ask someone higher up who knows you only superficially.

### The Statement of Purpose

Application forms for most graduate schools require an applicant to write a statement of purpose several hundred words long. Typical instructions read as follows:

*Write a brief statement concerning both your past work in your intended field of study and allied fields, your plans for graduate study at this university, and your subsequent career plans.*

If thoughtfully organized and well written, the statement of purpose can do much to promote your admission to a competitive graduate program. It should be upbeat and positive, highlighting your qualifications for admission to graduate school. Through the requirement to write a statement of purpose, the admission committee members invite you to tell them whatever you think is important. Because so many students apply to graduate schools, only a few programs conduct personal interviews anymore. Instead, admission committees rely upon the statement of purpose to give them a sense of applicants' personal commitment to acquire an advanced degree or certificate.

Following are hints on writing a strong statement of purpose:

**Good writing is rewriting.** Think of the statement of purpose as a writing test:

misspelled words, typographical errors, and poor grammar will not suggest a strong potential for success in a graduate or professional school, where communication skills are so important. Edit and rewrite your statement several times for content, organization, and style.

**Don't tell the admission committee what you think they want to hear.** Successful applicants write about themselves in an authentic prose voice, telling what they think is important about their backgrounds and their achievements.

**Clearly explain your motivations for graduate study.** Name the advanced degree you seek. If your decision to go to graduate school comes from life experiences, explain these. Remember that insights gained from undergraduate education or your AmeriCorps experience may be relevant.

**Emphasize strengths and accomplishments.** The statement of purpose provides a chance to describe intellectual strengths and life accomplishments. This is an opportunity not to be wasted. Write about academic achievements—even if you've been out of college for several years. Inspirational courses that pointed the way to graduate or professional school are worth describing. Be sure to highlight a good grade point average (GPA), even if it is also listed on a transcript. Successful completion of a senior thesis or comprehensive examination in the undergraduate major

should be listed as well. Note any graduation accomplishments, such as honors—Magna or Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa membership, etc.

Life and work experience can also be important. Graduate and professional schools are looking for mature individuals; many seek applicants with extensive prior experience in areas related to the graduate field. It is important to understand the skills needed to succeed in the graduate field and to explain how you developed those you already have through volunteer and paid work experience, international travel, etc.

**Be specific and present evidence.** Too often, applicants write in glittering generalities. Wise applicants, however, present specific evidence. When explaining a particular strength or accomplishment, include the details. For example, if describing a work experience, explain it in some depth: Where did the work occur? What were its most challenging aspects? What did you learn that is relevant to the graduate school experience? Statements of purpose that present evidence and speak in the specific vocabulary of the real world will be well received.

**Write about your AmeriCorps experience.** If your choice of a specific degree or a particular program was influenced by your AmeriCorps experience, tell why. Graduate admission committees seek individuals who are in some way unique. AmeriCorps is a mark of uniqueness, and

elements of the assignment are worth highlighting. Remember that some people may know little about AmeriCorps, so be sure to describe the program and your experience as clearly as possible.

**Tell a story.** Be anecdotal. One of the best ways to be specific and present evidence is to tell a real-life story. Readers want to learn about the applicant as a person, and a paragraph describing a challenging life experience or an event that pointed you toward graduate education can humanize your statement of purpose. In many ways, the AmeriCorps experience is an anecdotal experience, one filled with memorable people, challenges, frustrations, and triumphs. Parts of this experience may be worth describing in a statement of purpose.

**Write with integrity.** Applicants worry needlessly about telling an admission committee what they really think about important, controversial issues, believing that opinions or stands on an issue will alienate readers. The fact is that admission committees seek thoughtful applicants who hold informed opinions developed through challenging life experiences.

**Explain career goals.** A means to an end, graduate education exists to prepare students for a career. Tell the admission committee about your career goals, both for the short and long term.

**Explain why you wish to enroll in the specific graduate program.** Admission committee members tend to be

impressed by people who can do this in a rational manner. Evidence of research about the program, its faculty, and its resources is worth presenting, as is reference to a campus visit and conversations with faculty and staff. Explain specifically how the graduate curriculum fits into your long-term career plans.

**Beware of the tyranny of time.** Many applicants assume, incorrectly, that they must account for every year of their life. Instead, your statement of purpose needs to be a selective document that emphasizes those parts of your past that are relevant to admission.

**Don't be intimidated by length limits.** A good statement of purpose can usually be written in 750 to 1,000 words. Such a length is not so short as to limit the ability to explain qualifications fully, yet not so long as to bore the reader. Don't be obsessed with squeezing the statement onto the form provided. If necessary, you can continue the statement on an extra sheet of paper. Single-space typed paragraphs separated by double spacing are particularly readable. The fact is that, if the statement of purpose is well-written, authentic, and eloquent, length becomes less and less a consideration in the mind of a reader.

## Financial Aid

The thought of costs can be needlessly intimidating to anyone thinking about applying to

graduate or professional school, even if an AmeriCorps educational award is available. Many people assume that most advanced education must be paid out of personal funds, and that they cannot apply until they have amassed a small fortune in a savings account. Others assume they must find money from some outside source before they can apply to graduate or professional school. Both groups misunderstand the major trends in the funding of an advanced education.

For one thing, many people work full time and go to graduate and professional school in the evenings and on weekends. These students pay as they go. This is a particularly notable pattern among those seeking a law degree or a Master's in Business Administration (MBA). Education taken in this manner usually requires at least a year longer than if the students attended school full time.

A variety of funding sources for graduate and professional school lie outside the realm of the university. For example, government agencies, private foundations, and some companies will provide direct grants and other support to individual applicants. In addition, special funding programs exist for members of minority groups that have traditionally been excluded from opportunities in higher education. However, there is not as much of this money available as many assume, and it is far from being the most common source of financial aid.

The fact is that the bulk of financial aid for an advanced education is funneled through the graduate and professional schools themselves, rather than through outside funding agencies. Graduate admission personnel know

that astute applicants apply to more than one school. They know, too, that they must offer competitive financial aid packages to attract good students.

Personal decisions about financing a graduate education can be made only after acceptance to graduate school and after the school has made a financial aid offer. Therefore, apply to good graduate or professional schools regardless of how much they cost. Second, the more schools to which you apply and are admitted, the more likely you are to receive multiple financial-aid offers. The best situation occurs when an applicant is happily comparing financial aid offers from several schools.

Financial aid eligibility is based upon merit or need. As a former AmeriCorps member, you could be an attractive candidate for merit-based financial aid in graduate school because of your record of excellence and ability to respond to challenging situations.

Because federal financial-aid requirements and guidelines change regularly, you'll need to get current information from graduate school financial aid offices. Pay attention to the financial aid procedures that operate at all schools to which you apply. You may need to submit supplemental financial aid application forms for each.

A typical graduate student financial aid package will combine grants, paid work, and loans. The proportion of these three elements in a total financial aid package will vary among graduate programs and from year to year in any given program. If financial aid is

particularly important to you, get hold of a publication like *Financing Graduate School*, by Patricia McWade (Princeton, N.J.: Peterson's Guides, 1993). This book emphasizes long-range fiscal planning as the basis upon which to build a financial strategy for a graduate or professional school education.

## Final Considerations

If you are considering a graduate program, you are in the process of making a major life decision. If you decide to enroll, you'll be making a commitment to an academic program and a community, and you may be taking the definitive step in your professional career. Here are some questions (adapted from the Peace Corps for AmeriCorps) to consider when choosing a graduate program. Although appropriate for anyone making the graduate school decision, the questions will have differing relevance for each individual and for every academic program. It is important, however, to explore a wide range of options and to avoid eliminating possibilities prematurely when going through this process.

### ACADEMIC PROGRAM

- ☛ How strong is the department in which you will be studying?
- ☛ How long has the program been in existence?
- ☛ Is the department/program growing or shrinking?
- ☛ Does the program consider the time con-

straints of working students by providing flexible scheduling?

- ☛ Will you be able to handle the required course load?
- ☛ Does the faculty demonstrate knowledge and experience?
- ☛ Will the academic program train you to do what you want to do?
- ☛ Will you be able to get hands-on experience through the program?

### COSTS

- ☛ How much will tuition cost?
- ☛ What financial aid is available?
- ☛ What will be your overall income?
- ☛ How are living costs in the community?
- ☛ What will be the transportation costs to and from work, home, and school?
- ☛ What are the average housing costs in the area? Does the school offer student housing?
- ☛ What are your health insurance options?

### WORK COMPONENT

- ☛ What kind of help does the program offer with employment after the degree is completed?
- ☛ How have earlier program graduates fared in regard to employment?

### LOCATION

Because graduate programs exist just about everywhere, prospective students need to consider a number of factors: geography, climate, transportation, size of community—to name but a few.

- ☛ Could you survive the winters of Chicago or the summers of Mississippi?
- ☛ Can you afford living expenses in New York or San Francisco?
- ☛ How important is easy access to cultural and medical facilities?
- ☛ Will you need a car?
- ☛ Will public transportation get you around efficiently and safely?

### TYPE OF COMMUNITY

- ☛ Do you want to live in an urban or rural community?
- ☛ Do you want to live and/or work with a particular population or culture?
- ☛ Do you want to be able to use a second language?

Although the decision to go to graduate school is not one to make lightly, it is one that can lead to a fruitful experience for AmeriCorps graduates. During your deliberations, give the information and suggestions in this appendix some careful thought. Although the material was put together to help you gain an "edge" in the grad-school application process, you are

the one who ultimately determines whether admission committees consider your applications seriously. Do everything you can to make them sit up and take notice.

