APPLYING TO GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

CDC CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

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MACALESTER
How to Use This Guide

This resource was designed for Macalester students and alumni to provide suggestions in selecting graduate programs and the application process. For assistance in your exploration and applications, please make an appointment at the Career Development Center.

What degree do I want?

There are two types of graduate degrees, academic and professional. Academic degrees (Master of Arts, Master of Science, Ph.D.) involve communicating new knowledge through original research. Professional degrees (M.B.A., J.D., M.D., M.S.W.) stress the practical application of knowledge and skills. For some professions there is one distinct path; while for others there may be many different programs that could lead to similar or identical careers. Choosing a program that fits your goals requires multiple levels of research and exploration. This handout will encourage you to question your strengths, skills, and interests while applying for graduate school.

Ask yourself questions.

Beginning to think about graduate school often begins in college, but the majority of Macalester students choose to wait at least a year before applying. Working, interning, completing a fellowship, and traveling can strengthen an application and provide insights about your passions and interests. Consider the following questions to direct your grad school exploration:

1. What subjects and courses have interested you? Which projects have you been most passionate about? Why?
2. Is there a particular region, period, or ideology that interests you? Why? What in particular appeals to you? Will you be able to incorporate these interests in your work?
3. Make a list of the top questions or problems that inspire you, along with the top areas of material you would like to study.
4. Reflect on your skills and strengths.
5. What appeals to you about continuing education? If the idea of conducting research or teaching in graduate school is important, this should influence your search.
6. What really does not appeal to you, and why not?
7. What does a graduate degree ideally enable you to do?

Adapted from "Some Thoughts on Thinking about Graduate School and then Acting on those Thoughts" by William North, available on the Carleton College Career Center website.

Through self-exploration, candidates illuminate degrees to pursue and criteria by which to select potential programs. The answers to self-study often serve as helpful material in crafting personal statements.

The Application Check-List

Though each school has a wide variety of requirements in their application process, the following check-list provides an outline of materials required for most programs. Note, law school and medical school often have significantly different application requirements and schedules. Speak with your pre-med or pre-law advisor for more information specific to that application process.

Adapted from “Planning for Graduate School” by Bowdoin College Career Planning Center.
Graduate School Application Check-List

12 to 15 Months before Enrollment

________ Research schools and funding options
________ Seek advice from faculty and professionals in your field, including Macalester alumni
________ Register for, prepare for, and take admissions tests
________ Request letters of recommendation
________ Draft your personal statement

9 to 12 Months before Enrollment

________ Revise your personal statement
________ Confirm your letters of recommendation
________ Submit application forms and fees
________ Request and submit transcripts
________ Prepare for and conduct interviews
________ Follow up with each program

6 Months before Enrollment

________ Complete financial aid applications
________ Consider your options

Research Schools and Funding Options

Researching programs and funding concurrently can allow you to take full advantage of scholarship and fellowship opportunities. For more information on funding options, please see our Guide to Financing Graduate School.

Once a student has decided to apply to graduate school, the selection of schools to which to apply becomes an important decision. A list of objective and subjective criteria can be very useful for comparing and evaluating graduate school programs. In some fields, a variety of educational paths can lead to similar goals. Speak with mentors and find resources published by professional organizations in your field to guide your choice of program.

The following factors are adapted from PATH: A Career Workbook for Liberal Arts Students by Howard Figler. Additional academic, geographical, and personal factors can be added. Make a list of criteria that are important to you in selecting a graduate program. Which programs match your criteria?
Useful Sources for Researching Graduate Schools

People

- Macalester professors, advisors, alumni, and others who have attended graduate school in your area of interest
- Career Development Center career counselors
- Potential employers in your field
- School representatives visiting campus or graduate school fairs
- Current faculty, students, staff at the graduate school

General Websites

GradSchools.com
http://www.gradschools.com/

Peterson’s
http://www.petersons.com/

GradView
http://www.gradview.com/

National Association of Graduate and Professional Studies
http://www.nagps.org/

Graduate School Guide
http://schoolguides.com

U.S. News & World Report
http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools

Books

Peterson's Graduate Programs Guide is available in the reference section of the library. It includes information about programs in the following fields:

- Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences
- Biological Sciences
- Physical Sciences, Mathematics, Agricultural Sciences, the Environment & Natural Resources
- Engineering & Applied Sciences
Register for and Complete Admissions Tests

Graduate and professional schools frequently require applicants to submit scores on standardized tests. Students are encouraged to check each school they are considering for test requirements. Register for these tests online through the following websites.

**Common Graduate-Level Admissions Exams**
- Graduate Record Exam (GRE): [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT): [www.mba.com/the-gmat.aspx](http://www.mba.com/the-gmat.aspx)
- Miller Analogies Test (MAT): [www.milleranalogies.com](http://www.milleranalogies.com)
- Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): [www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/reserving/](http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/reserving/)

**English Language Proficiency**
If English is not your first language, you may be required to submit proof of your English language abilities. Some institutions will waive this testing requirement if you completed an undergraduate degree in English. Check with the graduate institution for more information.

- International English Language Testing System (IELTS): [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)
- Pearson Test of English (PTE): [www.pearsonpte.com](http://www.pearsonpte.com)

**Preparing for Admissions Tests**

Before beginning preparations for a particular admissions test, be sure you have determined the test requirements of each program to which you are applying. Taking practice tests can point out specific areas of weakness for preparation. Buying a prep book is generally advisable. If you're interested in taking a courses, consider the following programs.

**Test Prep Courses**
- Kaplan: [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com)
- The Princeton Review: [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)
- University of Minnesota: [www.cce.umn.edu/Grad-School-Test-Prep/](http://www.cce.umn.edu/Grad-School-Test-Prep/)

Given the diversity of learning and test preparation styles, the CDC does not endorse or recommend one test prep guide or resource.

The **MAX Center** offers GRE assistance, be sure to check their events calendar for more information.
Letters of Recommendation

Each professor has unique expectations for students seeking letters of recommendation. Be sure to ask what materials they would like you to provide. The CDC encourages students and alumni to inquire with faculty individually. Many departments and some professors have sections of their website dedicated to proper procedures for recommendations; be sure to check before making your request.

The CDC has consulted the following resources provided by the Psychology department, Professor Moore in the International Studies Department, and Student Affairs; however, these are not the only departments that offer these resources. Each list outlines necessary documents, important rules of etiquette, and reminders for students.

www.macalester.edu/academics/psychology/aftermacalester/recommendations/
www.macalester.edu/internationalstudies/moore-recomm.html
www.macalester.edu/studentaffairs/forms/seekingrecommendation/

Maximize your chances of obtaining strong letters of recommendation by considering the following suggestions:

• Cultivate relationships with faculty and supervisors throughout your academic career. Consult with them on your application process to ensure they are able and willing to write a strong letter.

• Give references time to write letters of recommendation, at least two to three weeks.

• Select references from a discipline relevant to the program of study and who have evaluated your work in a given area.

• Ask references if they are willing to write a favorable or strong letter of recommendation.

• Speak with your reference about why the program appeals to you and explain how it will contribute to your future goals.

• Provide references with documents that outline your experiences and goals, including:
  o A list of all programs, due dates, and if letters must be submitted online or by mail.
  o All forms or links to online forms necessary for completing recommendations; fill in as much of the forms as you can before submitting to your recommender.
  o A pre-addressed, stamped envelope for each recommendation to be mailed.
  o A list of courses taken, work performed, or research conducted with your reference; consider adding samples of your writing or projects.
  o Resume or CV that includes any relevant experience.
  o Personal statement.
  o Transcript, GPA, and admissions test scores, if appropriate.

• Organize your materials professionally. Create a chart cover letter that lists schools, degrees, deadlines, submission methods, and other relevant information. Submit requests in a folder that contains the material listed above. Order forms by due date and organize with paper clips, Post-It Notes, etc.
• Decide whether to waive your rights to the recommendation. See the recommendation waivers section for more information.

• Most importantly, prior to hearing back from schools, send your reference a thank you letter. As time goes on, update them about your application process.

**Recommendation Waivers**

Many recommendation forms include a section that describes your rights to see the content of the recommendation should you be accepted into the program. You may either waive that right, which means the content of the recommendation will remain unknown to you. If you do not waive that right, you will be able to read the recommendation when you arrive at graduate school.

Forms generally indicate that recommendation letters are treated the same regardless of your choice. However, some readers believe that recommenders will give a more honest appraisal of an individual’s performance if the student chooses to waive the right to see the document. Ask your recommender how he or she generally treats this issue.

**Draft and Revise Your Personal Statement**

The personal statement allows the committee to have a picture of the student as an individual. By writing these statements, students may clarify goals and ideas for themselves and others (e.g., individuals writing letters of recommendation). Proofreading is essential.

Check out the Career Development Center's Guide to Writing Personal Statements, available online at [www.macalester.edu/cdc/resources/](http://www.macalester.edu/cdc/resources/).

**Application Forms and Fees**

The application form requires information needed to process the student’s application. Critiquing forms for accurate, complete, and well-considered answers as well as legibility, neatness, correct spelling, and proper grammar are essential.

Though most schools require application fees, waivers are available. Check with the Financial Aid Office at each institution about need-based reimbursement. Likewise, speak with your academic department advisor and coordinator about opportunities. For example, the English Department's Thomas Critchett Fund offers up to $300 to fund application fees, GRE fees, and copying and mailing costs for students applying to graduate programs in English Literature, Creative Writing, or Education.

**Transcripts**

Though normal processing time for transcripts is one business day, make your request to the Registrar’s Office at least two weeks in advance. If you would like to pay by credit card, you may do so via the Academics tab on 1600Grand. For those who have already graduated, please visit [https://iwantmytranscript.com/macalester](https://iwantmytranscript.com/macalester). Credit card payments require an additional processing fee. If you would like to pay using cash or check, you must mail a written request that includes your signature. The appropriate form is available on the Registrar's website.

**Interviews**

Some graduate schools require applicants to be interviewed. An interview offers the school the
opportunity to find out how you think and approach problems. You may be asked to deal with controversial issues in your field, so it is useful to think about the following ahead of time:

What are the questions that might be asked?
What is this program seeking in applicants?
What do you have to contribute to the program and the field?
How will you benefit from the program?
How will the program contribute to your career goals?
What do you want the interviewer to know about you?
What questions do you have about the program?

Tips for Preparing for Interviews

• Utilize the CDC’s Guide to Interviewing
• Practice the interview
• Practice the interview with a CDC counselor and discuss feedback/suggestions
• Use video equipment to record your practice interviews

Following Up

Sending in completed application forms does not signify the end of the graduate school application process. It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that all materials have been sent and received on time! To ensure consideration of their applications, students must complete the follow-up steps listed below:

• Contact each program to make sure they have received completed application materials
• Contact appropriate sources regarding missing materials, then ensure they are received
• Continue to research programs by speaking with students, faculty, alumni, etc.
• Determine which program(s) best match your interests/needs and rank them in terms of admissions preferences

Weighing Your Options

Once the application process is completed, graduate programs determine which students receive admissions offers. Although acceptance by more than one school will provide choices, it can potentially contribute to more stress and anxiety. During the waiting and acceptance/rejection period, it is important to keep the following suggestions in mind:

• Remember that you must also decide whether to accept or reject a program’s offer for admission.
• Think about how to respond to possible acceptance/rejection scenarios, especially if you have applied to more than one program.
• Although ranking your preferences for graduate programs is helpful, the acceptance/rejection process can be complex. For example, a student who has not heard from his or her first choice for a graduate program may receive an offer from their second choice. In this situation, the student could choose one of several options:
  a) Immediately reject the offer
  b) Immediately accept the offer rather than wait to hear from their first choice
c) Ask for time to make a decision and contact their first choice to see if they are still being considered or wait to hear from the program

• Seek support (e.g., parents, friends, faculty, CDC) when going through the application process.

Alternative Plans

During the application process, some candidates elect to forego graduate school at the time. Lack of funding or perhaps rejection by their top programs prompts them to wait, reapply next year, and consider alternatives. It is important to have alternative plans or ideas in case of rejection by graduate schools. Students may want to allow themselves time to get support or perhaps counseling. Some students experience relief realizing that they really did not want to go to graduate school at this time. If you need help, be sure to seek support from friends, faculty, family, or assistance from counselors. If there were alternative plans in case graduate school did not work out, the student can evaluate those plans for the present. If there were no plans, the student will want to examine options with a career counselor.

Points to consider when making alternative plans:

• Consider financial needs. Do you need a job immediately? Would a current job or temporary work be sufficient while you do a job search?

• Assistance is available for a job search. The Career Development Center offers counseling appointments, networking events, online resources such as the Macalester Career Connection on LinkedIn, and the Job and Internship Database to connect you with employment opportunities.

• Do you still want to go to graduate school later on? Consider reapplying to the places of most interest, especially if you knew that you had the qualifications or you'll be strengthening your application through your job, training, internship, or volunteer opportunity.

• Determine what would enhance your qualifications for graduate school in a field or a given program.

  Experience. Obtain an internship, volunteer position, or job. Experience in the field will often strengthen your application and guide future research.

  Education. Consider taking courses to complete pre-requisites or strengthen your academic record in a given area. Statistics courses are almost always useful.

  Research. Ask professors if they need assistance with summer research. Working with professors to publish a paper can provide invaluable academic experience.

  Study. If admissions test scores were a significant factor in the program’s decisions not to accept you, sign up for a prep program and re-take the exam.

If you need assistance during your graduate school search, don’t hesitate to reach out to faculty and staff. Did you know?

• Some departments offer graduate school prep; ask your department coordinator if any events are planned for this year.
• Writing tutors at the MAX Center can assist you in crafting your personal statement.
## Next Steps:

### Highlighted CDC Services
**Career Counseling Appointments for:**
- Clarify strengths & interests
- Discuss potential career plans
- Review resume
- Plan job search strategies
- Interview prep

**Networking & Personal Branding:**
- Tools to Access Mac Alumni
- Social Media Inventory
- LinkedIn Profile Review

### Complimentary CDC Guides
- Resume & C.V. Guide
- Talking about your Skills Workbook
- Interviewing
- Writing Personal Statements
- Job Search Skills & Tools

**All guides are available for download on the CDC Web site.**

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**Need help? Questions?**
- Scheduled 30- or 60-min. appointments
- Drop-in Appts: M-F: 2-4pm
- Appointments in person, phone & Skype.

**Connect with CDC**

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