

Guide to Graduate School

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Disclaimer: These tips are based on my professional experiences, discussions with professional contacts, and feedback from Mount Holyoke alumnae. You should consult others for advice as well and make the decisions that you feel are best for your situation.

Researching Graduate Programs

1) Types of Programs

- The Career Development Center has an excellent [guide to types of graduate programs](#), including specialized programs related to medicine (MD), business (MBA), and social work (MSW), among others.
- You can choose to take graduate coursework to earn certificates, or pursue MA programs to gain further academic knowledge of a topic (e.g. Peace and Conflict Studies) or a region (Russian and Eastern European Studies).
- Public policy programs are MA programs geared towards those who want to work in government or at think tanks, NGOs, and companies working in that field. *US News and World Report* maintains a comprehensive [ranking list](#) of public policy programs.
- If you are interested in becoming a lawyer, you must obtain a JD from a law school. These programs typically take three years to complete. *US News and World Report* maintains a comprehensive [ranking list](#) of law school programs.
- PhD programs are designed to train students to become professors. Your “fit” is the most important aspect for this type of degree. You should search the faculty roster to identify specific faculty you would like to work with or who could serve as your mentor; and you should discuss that in your personal statement when you apply. Talk to your advisor and other professors to help you through this process.
- NOTE: Your undergraduate major does not limit your choices. Graduate programs are looking less at what you have learned so far and more at how well you have learned. If you have a strong application and good rationale, you can get admitted to a variety of programs.

2) Length

- The time it takes to complete a certificate or degree depends on the specific program. Graduate certificates can be attained in as little as one year, MA programs typically take two years, law school is normally three years, and PhD programs generally take five to seven years to complete.

3) Cost

- Some programs, particularly law school, can be expensive (the average student leaves law school with \$75,000 to \$100,000 in debt). Smaller MA programs may cost \$15,000-\$20,000 per year.
- Just like undergrad, financial assistance in the form of student loans and scholarships is available, and there are sometimes opportunities to become a teaching assistant for a course, or a research assistant for a professor that help pay for tuition (especially for those enrolled in PhD programs). Consult the specific programs to which you are applying to find out more about costs and financial aid. This information can usually be found on the program's website.
- Though they are competitive, there are many [national fellowships](#) to attend graduate school. To find out more, [schedule an appointment](#) with Ryan Lewis, Mount Holyoke College's National Fellowship Advisor.
- The Department of Politics awards [several fellowships](#) to attend graduate and law school (up to \$10,000). Deadlines are in early March of each year. You can apply in the year before you are going to begin graduate school or in any year during your graduate studies.

Deciding to Apply

1) Rationale

- For some jobs, such as being a lawyer or a college professor, having a graduate degree is a requirement.
- Most students attend graduate school for career development. Having a graduate degree can make you stand out and be more competitive in your search for jobs, and graduate degrees are often necessary for advancement to higher, leadership positions in the field.
- For some career paths, graduate degrees will not help you much and will only set you back in time and money before you can begin doing what you want to do. So do your research into the type of work you want to be doing and talk to people currently in the field to ascertain the value of going to graduate school for your particular career goals.

2) Timing

- Some students, who know exactly what they want to do and the necessary graduate degree to do so, attend graduate school immediately after undergrad.
- More typically, students attend graduate school two to four years later, after having gained experience in the field and honed in on their career goals. Increasingly, many professional MA programs are leaning heavily toward students who have taken “gap years” and have work experience relevant to the field of study, and those applicants have an advantage in admissions and financial aid.

3) Selecting Programs

- Talk to your advisor and other professors. They can give you a sense of what graduate school is like and whether it would be a good fit for you. They can also talk with you about why you want to go to graduate school and then advise you on what types of programs might help you reach those goals.
- Talk to professionals in the field in which you want to work. They will be able to give you the best advice as to when to go to graduate school, what types of programs to attend, and may have recommendations for specific schools that have strong reputations in the field.
- All programs will have specialties, offer different classes, and have faculty with specific expertise. For example, there will be some public policy programs that will be better for you depending on whether you want to work on development, peace and security, or health policy.
- Law schools are, by their nature, regional. You should look for a school located in the area of the country in which you intend to practice.

Applying

1) Deadlines

- Deadlines vary considerably by program. Early decision deadlines for law schools can be in late October, PhD and competitive MA programs most often have deadlines in December and January, and other programs have deadlines in late winter or early spring. Research the deadlines for programs thoroughly and plan accordingly.
- Applying for graduate school typically means spending the summer studying for and taking the GRE or LSAT, searching for programs that would be a good fit for you, and then spending the fall preparing the rest of your files and gathering letters of recommendation before submitting your applications.

2) Application Materials

- Almost all graduate programs in the United States require you to complete and earn particular scores on standardized tests. General graduate programs require the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), while law schools require the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). The LSAT is particularly important and is probably 80 percent of the law school admissions decision. The Career Development Center on campus has a [guide to standardized tests](#) as well as study materials and opportunities to take practice tests.
- You will need a résumé or curriculum vitae (CV, an academic résumé). For help on creating a résumé, see [Andy's Guide to the Job Market](#).
- All programs will require official undergraduate transcripts. You can be obtain them from the [Office of the Registrar](#).
 - Note: Many programs will have specific GPA requirements of which you should be aware.
- For many programs, you will be asked to submit a writing sample. This may mean revisiting an old seminar paper and revising it with the help of a professor.
- Letters of recommendation are vital to your graduate school application. Most require two or three letters, generally from professors who can attest to your ability to succeed at graduate-level education.
 - If you think you may go to graduate school sometime in the future, it is always a good idea to contact professors prior to graduating. Some may choose to write your letter while you are fresh in their minds and save it for when you will need it in a few years.
 - Contact potential recommenders six to eight weeks before the deadline, provide them with a copies of all your application materials (even if the personal statement is still a draft), and give them clear instructions on how to submit their letter.
- In some cases, a letter from someone who has seen you work in the field can also be helpful. For example, if you are applying for an MA program in Social Work, and you interned at a children's shelter, then a letter from the director of that shelter saying that you would be a great social worker would help your application. If you ask someone who is not a professor to write a letter, just make sure that they have an advanced degree themselves.