



What You Need to Know About Graduate School

By Dereck J. Rovaris, Sr., Ph.D.

Perhaps you have made the arduous decision to attend graduate school. Or maybe you are trying to gain some understanding of what it might entail. Choosing to pursue graduate study is a major decision. Therefore, the more information you can gather about the process, the more likely you are to make wise choices and realize success. Graduate training is not a process that you can take lightly, and as with anything else that is worth having, it requires you to work hard. Nevertheless, completing the process is not impossible, especially if you are well informed and you plan an effective strategy.

This article will guide you through the graduate application's process as well as provide insights about graduate training. Recent doctoral recipients and/or candidates will share their insights on attending graduate school.

The Application Process

I. Create a list of potential schools. To maximize your opportunities, you will need to apply to five or more schools. The more schools you apply to, the more chances you have for admission. By consulting *The Peterson's Guides* (found in your library's reference section or at <http://www.petersons.com>), you will uncover a comprehensive listing of graduate opportunities in your respective area. The listings include descriptions of each discipline and its sub-fields. It will also include a wealth of data about the various institutions in those disciplines (location, entrance requirements, acceptance rates, tuition costs, funding options, and enrollment demographics, etc.).

To create your list of schools, first consider factors like quality of the program, areas of research, strength of the university, reputation of faculty in your area, availability of funding, institutional support, and commitment to minority students. Other factors that may play a part include geographic region, size of enrollment, racial make-up of students, community in which the school is located, campus facilities and activities. After weighing these factors, compile a list of 10 or more institutions. Then contact each school. Wherever possible visit the campus. Campus visits can sometimes influence your



choice significantly. In any case, request application materials and any other information that will help you with the admissions process. Ultimately, you want to select the university that will give you your best opportunity for success.

II. Register, practice, and then take the Graduate Records Examination (GRE). The GRE is the entrance exam most graduate schools require. It has assumed a more important role in the admissions process than was ever intended. Register early, practice using a review course or study manual, and schedule your exam at least a year, but preferably a year and a half, before you intend to start graduate school, and take the test and do well. Take it early so that you can submit scores, along with the rest of your application. Early applicants are more likely to be admitted and funded than those who apply late.

III. Ask faculty members for letters of recommendation. Often applicants will try to impress admission committees with letters from local politicians, high ranking university officials, or even their pastors. These people may appear to be good sources for recommendations because of their positions or their prestige, especially if they know the applicant and are able to say nice things

about the applicant. Nevertheless, admissions committees are primarily interested in the academic abilities of the applicants. This nearly always requires evaluators who have taught the applicant and who can speak favorably about the ability of applicants to succeed with graduate level work. Faculty members from whom you have earned at least two Bs or higher (preferably two or more As) should be able to write strong letters of recommendation for you.

When requesting these letters, always remember that they are just that, requests. They should therefore be requested courteously and thoughtfully. This means that you should approach your faculty members early and that you provide them with enough information so that they effectively transmit their opinions of your potential. Follow up to make sure that they have mailed your recommendations and thank them in writing once they have done so. By all means, let them know when you get accepted and keep them informed of your plans.

IV. Write a statement of purpose and have it critiqued. The statement of purpose often distinguishes the difference between winners and losers. Those who get accepted almost always have better statements of purpose than those who do not. What makes for a good statement is its overall quality and its clear indication of potential for graduate study. A good statement will be concise: It says what you have to say as efficiently as possible (most are 1 to 1 1/2 pages). It is organized: Your essay is well thought out and structured. Working from an outline will help. It is clear: It says exactly what you want it to say without ambiguous references. It is honest: In it you do not pretend to be who you are not, but neither do you sell yourself short. It is personal: It is uniquely yours; it is a statement about you. You do not talk about the general, but about your specific interests. It is positive: It sells you by using positive

attributes. It does not dwell on negatives like low grades or test scores.

What is included in a statement of purpose varies from school to school. Be sure to read each application carefully and provide the specific information requested. Typically you are asked to include answers to most of the following questions: Why do you want to get a graduate degree? What are your specific goals for graduate study? How have you been academically prepared for these goals? What are your goals beyond graduate study? What tangible experiences helped prepare you (research projects, internships, professional and volunteer experiences, publications, exchange programs, etc.)? Why should you be admitted? Address the individual requests of each school, so write a slightly different statement for each school to which you apply. Mention strengths, faculty members with whom you would like to work, or other reasons for selecting that particular school. Make sure your statement is personal and specific and make sure that it accurately reflects your understanding of the program, and how it matches your academic plans.

Upon completion of your statement, show it to a friend and ask for a critique. Ask whether it makes sense and whether it accurately reflects you. Correct it and then show it to a faculty member. Ask the same questions. Inquire about punctuation and grammar. Revise it, if necessary, and have it proofed one last time. Once you are satisfied, include it with the rest of your application. This process may seem tedious for a one-page statement, but you will seldom be asked to write a more important statement.

V. Complete and mail your applications for admission and financial/fellowship support. This is in fact a very important process, so you do not want to leave anything to chance. Type your application and make sure that it's neat and legible. MAIL ALL MATERIALS WELL

BEFORE ANY STATED DEADLINE! Institutions receive hundreds of applications and most have no room for late or incomplete applications.



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Order transcripts and test scores early enough to be mailed timely to the appropriate institutions. Similarly, complete all financial aid forms (some are separate) and fellowship/assistantship requests (most are included in the application). Make copies of everything! A completed, clean, and on-time application will not by itself gain you admission, but an incomplete, sloppy, or late application will ensure your rejection.

Completing your applications is just the beginning. Once you have been accepted, it is time to choose the school that you will attend. Then, it is time to go about the business of completing graduate school. For further advice on the entire graduate school process, several recent doctoral recipients and/or a graduate student nearing completion of the doctorate were surveyed. They are Dr. Dewana Thompson, assistant professor of psychiatry at the LSU Health Sciences Center in New Orleans; Evelyn Simien, Ph.D. candidate in political science at Purdue

University; and Dr. Tyra Turner, assistant professor of counseling at Arkansas State University. Their



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responses to five relevant survey questions follow:

I. What do you wish you had known before you started graduate school?

Thompson: In hindsight, I wish that I had known that as a graduate student it is okay to say 'no.' Graduate school can be a very rewarding experience, but it can also be an extremely stressful process. As a student, I wanted to gain multiple experiences and take advantage of as many opportunities as possible. I therefore frequently agreed to take on tasks that I actually did not have time for. I believe that there is an unwritten rule in graduate school that there can be political ramifications for not taking on a task that a professor has asked of you. Throughout my graduate career, I don't think anyone ever told me that it is okay to simply say no.

Simien: I wish that I had known about the high attrition rate for African-American students, faculty, and staff at my university. I wish that I had known more about the department and its faculty in terms of

research, placement of graduate students on the market, and rank. I wish that I had known more about the department's history with African-American students. Are African-American students passing qualifying exams and completing the program? What do the numbers look like?

Turner: One word comes to mind—politics. I was warned that academia was a highly political arena, but nothing prepared me for the level of political games that I encountered. Akin to politics is competition. I failed to realize that when I entered into graduate school, I had to compete with the cream of the cream. I soon discovered that people did not inquire about your grades on an examination to assist you on subsequent examinations. Most wanted to compare their grades to determine where they stood in relation to a person of color. I subconsciously knew that they felt the people of color were allowed into graduate school because of their race and not their intelligence. Finally, I was not aware of the level of dedication that it takes to pursue a graduate degree. I would go to class and work as a graduate assistant during the day and study and write papers until about 3 a.m. I spent my weekends in the library with tons of other students trying to absorb as much knowledge as possible. Graduate school requires that one be focused and not wavering in their desire to finish.

II. What would you tell a prospective graduate student about graduate school?

Thompson: Do your homework. Find out all that you can about your department and the university before you begin the program. Ask questions about the faculty and their areas of interest to find out which faculty share your research interests. Inquire about the department's retention rate for African-American students. Seek out available avenues for support within and outside of the

department including the types of financial aid available. Talk with current students about their experiences and with graduates about job opportunities, and whether they felt their graduate experience prepared them for the workplace.

Simien: Take GRE prep courses seriously. The GRE does matter. It can either get you in or keep you out of the best programs. Apply to a number of schools, and aim for the best ones ranked in your field. I would visit the school, and speak with those currently enrolled in the department of your choice.

Turner: I unashamedly admit that if it were not for my relationship with Jesus Christ, I would have never made it through graduate school. It is not enough to be the most intelligent person in the class because there is always someone smarter. It is also not enough to impress people by speaking in the most intellectual jargon you know. There is always



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someone who knows a longer and more impressive sounding word. But what matters the most is that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are greatness and that you come from greatness because of Christ.

III. What would you have done differently?

Thompson: I would have taken advantage of the vast resources that the university has. There are several programs on a university's campus that could be beneficial to students. Taking advantage of these can be very helpful to students. Such programs may include writing centers, computer centers, math centers, etc.

Simien: I would have read more, and taken full advantage of the writing lab at my undergraduate institution.

Turner: I would have definitely acquired more effective study skills prior to entering graduate school. It is amazing the amount of data and knowledge that is digested in one day of graduate school. I would have attended several workshops on time management skills and study skills. I would have also maintained a "true" savings account in graduate school.

Money needs to be maintained in savings for miscellaneous educational expenses such as making copies (especially for each student in your study group), purchasing ink cartridges for the printer, extra expenses to attend conferences, and professional association membership fees.

IV. What did you like least about graduate school?

Thompson: The thing I liked least about graduate school was the lack of diversity. Growing up in New York City and being a graduate of a Historically Black College allowed me to live in environments that encompassed a wide range of diverse cultures and interests. My graduate experience taught me that, as opposed to these experiences being readily available and a part of the university's make-up, I had to seek them out or create them, and fight for their existence and sustainability. I would hope that graduate programs would continue to diversify

their faculty and student body so that the environment ultimately changes to fit the needs of the student and not that the student has to change his/her needs to fit the environment.

Simien: The cutthroat environment. Graduate students are competitive, and some faculty members have their favorites.

Turner: Of course I abhorred the politics and the competition of graduate school. Above all, I hated the gnawing feeling that I had to "prove myself." It was not only a feeling but also an expectation. I was not alone. Most of the people of color shared the same feeling.

V. What did you like most about graduate school?

Thompson: I thoroughly enjoyed my program and the knowledge that I gained throughout my graduate career. I was fortunate enough to have had an advisor and mentor who took her role to heart. She not only advised me on my direction in the program, but she cultivated and prepared me for the workplace.

Simien: I learned how to read, write, and think more critically. The "politics" of graduate school made me a stronger person. I became more determined, and I felt compelled to surpass my fellow students in the program.

Turner: I enjoyed the cultural diversity. I met people from all over the world in graduate school. I was able to gain knowledge of their cultural values and practices. I also enjoyed meeting people with like interests and vision. I also enjoyed working with several professors and students who really had an interest in my well being. One of my professors took me under his wing and literally groomed me to be an excellent researcher, teacher, and advisor.

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