Tips for Applying to Grad School

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND MATH
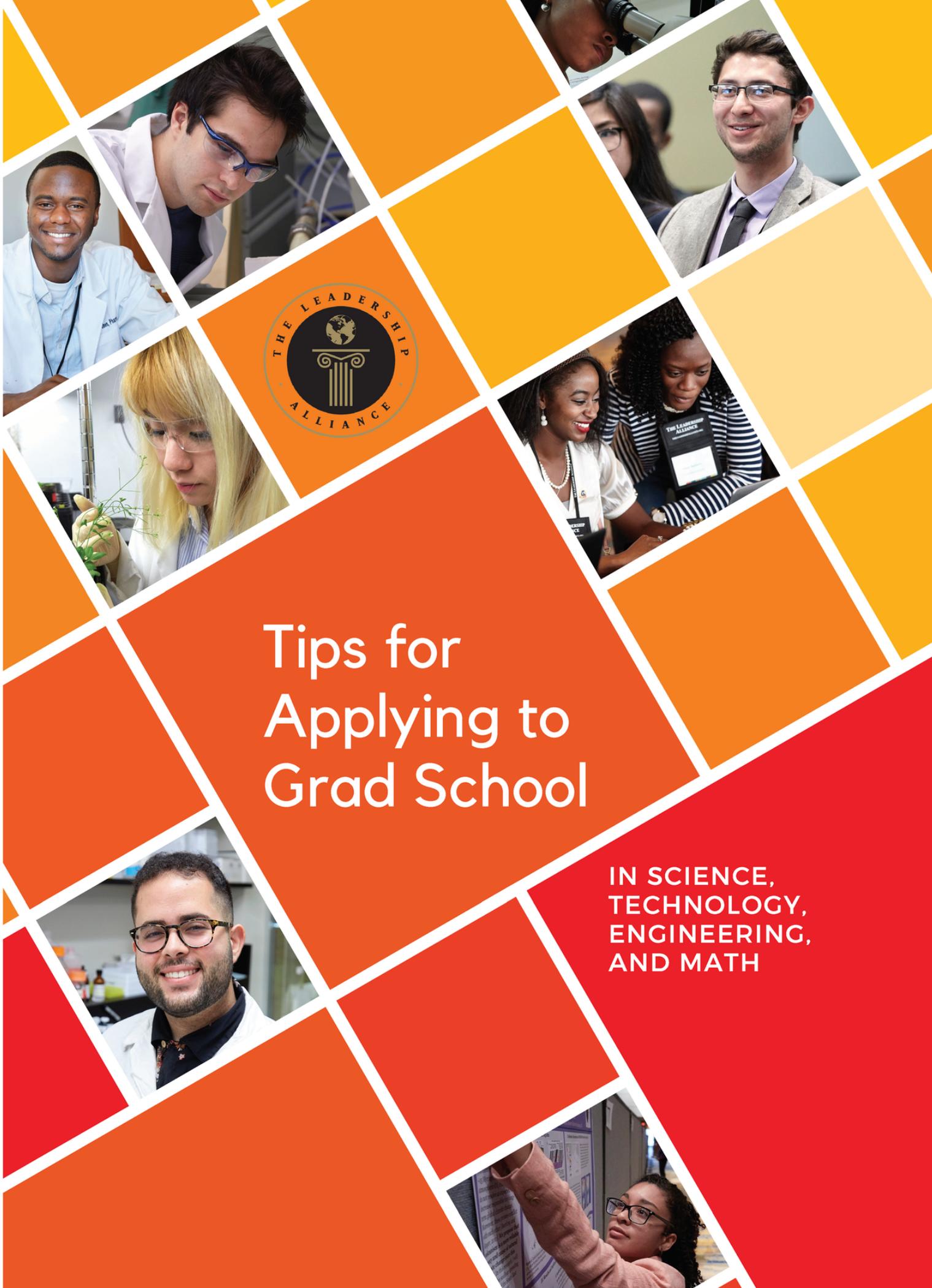
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Contents

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE

Overview of the Application Process

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1) Evaluate your options carefully and from a variety of angles.

2) Assemble your materials well in advance of the deadline, especially your statements and letters.

3) Submit your applications early to allow for unexpected snags.

By Dr. Sheila Thomas
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This article provides a broad overview of the graduate school application process. Applying to graduate school takes planning and effort. Please refer to this article for guidance on how and when to approach different parts of the application process.

There are four big phases of the graduate school application process:
1. Evaluating your options and planning your applications
2. Assembling your application materials
3. Submitting your applications
4. Interviewing, conducting site visits, and choosing programs

You should start the first phase a year or more before applications are due, which is in the late fall and early winter for most graduate programs. During this phase, you will want to take stock of your graduate school options to determine if graduate school is right for you (page 7) and, if so, whether to pursue a PhD (page 4) or another degree.

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You will also want to decide whether to enroll in graduate school directly after your undergraduate studies or take a gap year (page 10) to pursue a post-baccalaureate course of study, volunteer, travel or gain additional research experience. Once you decide on a degree program, you will want to gather information on potential schools and departments (page 12) and make an application list, plan, and budget (page 18). As you add schools on to your application list, seek out fee waivers to ease the cost of applications.

In the spring and summer before you submit your applications, you should plan to assemble the main components of your application: entrance exam scores (page 15), statement of purpose (page 21), resume or biosketch (page 24), and letters of recommendation (page 26). Plan on spending late summer and early fall filling out and submitting your applications (page 29). This process can be quite time intensive. It is best to start early.

As you assemble your materials for your application to PhD programs, you may be thinking, "I successfully applied to college, how is this any different?" On the surface, it doesn't seem very different. You will be gathering information about potential schools, taking a standardized test and submitting scores to schools, writing some essays, putting together a CV, and asking individuals that know you well to write letters of recommendation. It all sounds very familiar and to some degree it is—but there are some key differences that are important to keep in mind so that you can apply to the institutions that are right for you and put together a strong application.

1) You are no longer applying to be a student, you are applying to be a junior colleague. Unlike college admissions, the individuals reading your application, and making the decision of who to interview and/or admit, are faculty.
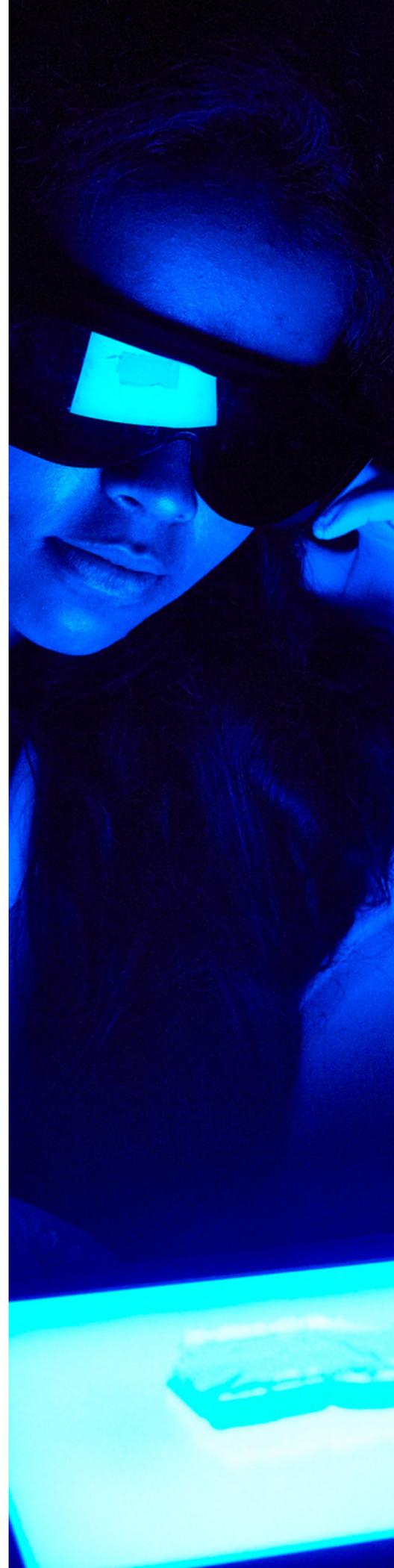
Therefore, as you put together these different pieces, particularly as you select your letter writers, work on your Statement of Purpose, and for those in the humanities and social sciences, work on a writing sample, remember that your audience is essentially those professors that are lecturing you and/or have mentored you through your research. Consider what these faculty would want or need to know to determine if you should be their junior colleague.

2) As a PhD student and junior colleague, you will no longer be just a consumer of knowledge, you will also be a producer. Taking classes will be a small fraction of your PhD. The PhD is about developing new ideas and making discoveries. Consider what you need to tell them in your statement and who can speak to your potential to contribute to the knowledge of your field. Also, consider whether the institutions you are thinking about applying to will provide you with the resources you need to be successful; and whether the faculty in the departments or programs you are considering support your scholarly interests. Remember, although you are applying to become their future colleague, they will also be yours.

Once your applications are submitted and under consideration by admissions committees (page 31), you will have to wait to hear about interviews and acceptances. Be prepared for interviews (page 34) and the post-interview process (page 36) if you are in a field that typically requires them. If all goes well, you will have multiple competing offers and will need to decide between them (page 38). If you do not happen to get accepted, do not be discouraged. Trying again the next year usually results in application success.

What do You Get From a PhD?

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

By Rochelle D. Smith
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Before you start researching potential schools and programs, you may be asking yourself if a PhD is right for you. This article describes the many benefits of a PhD, as well as some of the strategies graduate students can deploy to get the most out of their degrees.

The PhD, or the Doctorate of Philosophy, is the highest degree in research. This degree is awarded to individuals who have contributed to "the creation of new knowledge" by deeply studying a particular area of research, and advancing it by discovering or uncovering a new method, approach, design or protocol. Eight primary benefits of obtaining a PhD in STEM are:

1. Qualification for the highest academic and research positions
2. Diverse career options and higher lifetime economic gains
3. Funding for living expenses and tuition waivers
4. The sense of accomplishment from completing an advanced degree and academic respect

ACTION ITEMS

1) Schedule three 15-20 minute informational interviews with three individuals who have earned the degree you want to pursue.

2) Conduct a cost-benefit analysis (1) for choosing to pursue a PhD.

3) Sign up for TLA Connect (2) to meet potential mentors.

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5. The ability to impact millions of lives through research
6. Mastery of the scientific method
7. Development of critical thinking skills to answer complex questions
8. Improved Leadership and time management skills

Due to the depth of the research PhD students conduct, completion of the degree takes longer than undergraduate study. However, many scholars in STEM areas complete their doctoral studies in 5-7 years or less (3). Effective mentoring and consistent monitoring of progress can accelerate your progress while simultaneously maximizing the number and quality of research and professional tools that you acquire. You can sign up for a mentor through TLA Connect, as well as the National Research Mentors Network (NRMN) (4).

The First Two Years: Typically, doctoral programs begin with coursework and a qualifying exam. You will have the opportunity to develop your core areas of knowledge and add new, critical tools to your toolbox. There will also be a period of rotation among labs to get to know potential research mentors. If your program does not have formal rotations, there will be some other means for you to evaluate the Principal Investigators (PI's) in the department, as well as the labs that they run.

You and Your Mentor: Your relationship with your PI will be central to your graduate career after your courses and exams. This close, often lifelong, professional relationship is one of the most valuable things that you get from a PhD program. You and your PI will be responsible for setting key milestones and ensuring that you reach them as you develop your research question, conduct your doctoral research, go on the job market, and establish your research agenda at a new research institution. It is helpful to have an Individual Development Plan (5) to guide you in these efforts. You and your advisor may also consider a mentor/mentee compact (6).

Midway Through Your Program: Completing your PhD is a lot like completing a marathon; midway through you have loosened up and begun to hit your stride.

But even while you are in the groove, the end can feel a long way off. Make sure there are concrete, realizable goals built into your research and your Individual Development Plan. Savoring these accomplishments will help fuel you toward the finish line.

Finishing: You've almost made it! In your final years, you'll be writing up your research and preparing to go on the job market. You have added tons of new tools to your scientific toolbox. You have developed a network of fellow scientists, including both peers and mentors. And you have added to the sum total of human knowledge through your doctoral research. Now it is time to begin putting together your job market dossier, which will feature your research and research skills, teaching accomplishments, and anything else job applications call for. Take this opportunity to highlight all of the above accomplishments. Focusing on all you have acheived will give you momentum for the job market, as well as navigating well-intentioned questions from friends and family around the holidays (8).

The depth of knowledge gained by earning the PhD is very rewarding. It is a worthwhile endeavor and one of the best ways to find career and personal fulfillment, and at the same time provide the world with expertise and information that can eliminate suffering and provide information to make life better for humankind (8). To really gain additional insight set up short informational interviews with three individuals who have a STEM PhD in your field of interest.

1 www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_08.htm
2 www.leadershipalliancealumni.org
3 www.gradschoolhub.com/faqs/what-is-the-average-time-to-obtain-a-ph-d/
4 www.nrmn.net
5 http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/
6 https://ictr.wisc.edu/mentoring-2/mentoring-compactscontracts-examples/
7 http://annekrook.com/?page_id=905
8 http://education.seattlepi.com/benefits-earning-doctorate-3037.html

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Taking Stock of Your Graduate School Options

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1. Focus on the tasks and challenges you enjoy to identify potential degree programs.

2. Evaluate programs on fit, support, and quality of life.

3. Narrow till you have a list of schools that is feasible in terms of time and money.

By Dr. Don C. Brunson
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and Dr. Will Wittels
Program Manager,
The Leadership Alliance

Few decisions produce as much anxiety as those regarding the decision to go to graduate school. You may be wondering, "Should I go to grad school? Will it get me a job I want after investing all that time and effort? If I go, what kind of graduate degree should I get?" If you're asking these questions, know that you are not alone. The vast majority of people in or who have gone to graduate school, including your advisors, found themselves asking these very same questions. This article discusses strategies for taking stock of your graduate school options and putting together your graduate school list.

Like so many questions relating to graduate school, you should focus on fit. In this case, you should focus on the fit between the mode of thinking and the kind of skills you would acquire in graduate school and the kinds of problems, puzzles, and challenges that you would like to confront on a daily basis. If you find yourself "in the zone" when trying to answer a question to which no one knows the answer, then a graduate degree that gives you the skills to do that, such as a PhD, is probably right for you.

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"Focus on the fit between the mode of thinking and the kind of skills you would acquire in graduate school and the kinds of problems, puzzles, and challenges that you would like to confront on a daily basis."

More narrowly, if the kinds of puzzles that you love tend to concern questions of human health, then a degree in public health or the biological sciences is probably right for you.

Ultimately, you're choosing to learn a mode of thinking and problem solving that you'll be able to carry with you into whichever job you have. In the case of a PhD, you're learning methods for critical thinking and knowledge production that you can use in academia, industry, or government. Masters degrees emphasize the practical tools of a discipline while also exposing you to some of the research elements of that discipline. MD-PhD programs train you to think like a medical doctor and a researcher (1).

Those modes of thinking and problem solving are relevant to myriad jobs across academia, industry, and government. You will be able to deploy them in some capacity in any of those areas. By focusing on the skills you want to use, rather than the job you want to have, you guarantee that your graduate training will pay dividends in your career.

To start building your school list, begin researching schools according to your academic interests and the skills and training you wish to acquire. Research can be an interdisciplinary pursuit, so use specific search topics. Rather than searching for "Molecular and Cellular Biology," consider searching "protein methylation." Since your interests might not fully match those of prospective faculty mentors, consider pursuing opportunities on projects that are similar. That way, you will acquire tools ultimately needed to undertake the research that you want.

Once you identify a department/program, visit its website to learn more about faculty research interests and the department's philosophy on graduate education. Search for a graduate education administrative person (the title will be different at each institution). This person will often have access to information and other resources that might be very useful to you. Feel empowered to conduct "informational" interviews with representatives from prospective programs or e-mail faculty and graduate students in prospective programs.

Be aware that some PhD programs, such as some in Public Health, may require you to have a master's before applying. Make sure to note any requirements about previous degrees as you research programs.

Once you have a "long-list" of programs that interest you, start narrowing based on priorities: the "fit" between you and the research, the level of support you are likely to receive, and the appeal of the university and the city as a place to make your home for the next 4-7 years. Ensure that your list has at least a few programs that you would consider to be "reaches." The number of schools you apply to will depend on how much time and money you estimate you can put into the process. That said, apply to at least five or six schools. Also be aware that applying to more than a dozen schools will tax your time and your wallet (if fee waivers are unavailable). By utilizing these strategies, you should successfully identify programs that match your interests and put you on a pathway toward your ultimate goal.

1   https://students-residents.aamc.org/choosing-medical-career/article/why-pursue-md-phd/

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Is a Gap Year Right For Me?

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

By Rochelle D. Smith
Assistant Provost, Diversity Initiatives
Washington University in St. Louis

You may be considering taking time off before graduate school. This article covers strategies for making the most of your time off should you choose to take it.

The gap year has gained popularity among prospective students pursuing all types of advanced degrees since the 1980's (1). Recently, the popularity of taking a gap year has increased even more with high profile figures such as Malia Obama deciding to take a sabbatical before entering Harvard. Today, undergraduate students have more opportunities to take a gap year that will prepare them for their next academic journeys (2).

The complex undertaking of weighing the costs and benefits of this time off varies according to the student. Let us explore three of the top reasons one might want to take a gap year before graduate and professional school and discuss how to make the decision, what to do and when.

1. Bolster your Academic Profile: This approach is often the scenario for students who want to pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Some need to participate in experiences that will confirm a decision to pursue a certain career or educational pathway. Many will participate

ACTION ITEMS

1. Have a concrete plan regarding how you will spend your gap year.

2. Your gap experience should include an intensive research experience that provides you with a level of independence.

3. Consider applying and deferring if your priority is taking a break.

in research experiences in their chosen area of interest to submit a more competitive application. The postbac is perfect for the gap year to gain valuable technical experience. Postbaccalaureate Research Education Programs (PREP) and the Postbaccalaureate Intramural Research Training Award (Postbac Irta/Crta) are excellent opportunities for students from underrepresented groups interested in biomedical research. The National Institutes of Health supports PREP programs at campuses across the country (3) and the Irta/Crta in Bethesda, MD. (4). Industry leaders such as Novartis Pharmaceuticals also offer great postbac opportunities (5). Working at your alma mater in a lab or with a faculty mentor can also prove a valuable experience. Some students may also want to take courses after graduating to raise their GPA or have time to improve entrance exam scores to make themselves more competitive for top-ranked professional or graduate schools.

2. Travel: Many students apply to Fulbright (6) and other merit-based programs that involve travel. If a fellowship is unavailable, but you still want to travel, you may wish to "apply and defer" while still in school. Applying as an undergraduate allows for travel without the constraints of needing to attend admissions interviews.

3. Take a Break: The motivation might be to mature, gain more life skills or prepare for the rigor of advanced education. Students who have spent the better part of 17 years in school might also want to "recover" and reward themselves by taking some time off to do something different. This approach is very tricky for STEM-minded students and, if not planned correctly, can backfire. Admissions committees will want you to speak to how you spent your time since graduating. So the time off should involve working or volunteering in your field of interest.

1 www.forbes.com/sites/tanyamohn/2016/11/11/gap-years-on-the-rise-and-not-just-for-college-students
2 http://college.usatoday.com/2014/11/03/the-case-for-taking-a-few-years-off-before-grad-school/
3 www.nigms.nih.gov/Training/PREP/Pages/default.aspx
4 www.training.nih.gov/programs/postbac_irta
5 www.pharma.us.novartis.com/careers/postbaccalaureate-scholars
6 https://us.fulbrightonline.org/

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What Information Should I Gather?

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

**By Dr. Elizabeth Bowman
Assistant Director, Graduate Programs in
Biomedical Sciences
Vanderbilt University**

If you are reading this, you are likely in the beginning stages of applying to graduate programs and gathering information to determine where you will apply. You'll get personal advice, information on websites, and use your preferences to determine what programs fit you best. This article covers some simple steps you can take to gather and organize this data.

First, be sure to start early! You should be gathering information on your programs at least six months in advance, though nine months to a year in advance is ideal. The moment you start evaluating programs, create a document to organize your thoughts and data. I prefer generating a spreadsheet to organize diverse sets of information in an easily comparable format. Make note of the name of the program, the institution it is in, the application fee and deadline, contact information for the program (main administrator, email, and phone number), the director of the program, city of the institution, how far from home it is (if this is a consideration for you), the structure of the program (departmental, umbrella, interdepartmental, etc.), how many students are in the program, where you heard of the program, national program ranking (1), and NIH funding (2) (don't use these factors alone to rule out a program), the research faculty of interest to you (and maybe a brief description of their research), and other considerations.

ACTION ITEMS

1) Organize your information.

2) Search websites, talk with graduate students and faculty, check out rankings.

3) Keep taking organized notes! Use digital tools, such as spreadsheets, to compare schools.

"Each applicant looks for different things in potential graduate programs, but by considering broadly, you can begin to explore what is most important in your selection and make an informed decision."

Fill in the information as you familiarize yourself with programs. Your first and likely major information source will be program websites. As you look through each site, make a note of anything special about the institution or program, especially if you didn't notice this on other sites. Note any unique training opportunities, special academic or professional development resources, or courses that stick out to you. Include the relevant links as you navigate because very soon, the programs will all start to jumble together and you will quickly lose track of where you found specific features. Don't be afraid of seemingly random searches through sites. You will be led down the rabbit holes to useful information as you navigate through the many pages relevant to the programs. Take this time to explore while also making organized notes and writing down questions, so that information important to you doesn't get lost.

Next, approach your mentors to talk through your thoughts. Share a list of programs you plan to apply to, tell them what you like about the programs, and ask if there are any considerations you are missing in your analysis. Talk to MANY advisors, including your undergraduate advisors, research mentors, summer research directors, and even postdoctoral fellows or graduate students in your lab. Every person you talk to provides additional perspective during your search. Take notes! These sorts of specifics will be invaluable to you when you visit programs during interviews!

After searching online and talking to your advisors, turn to the program contacts themselves to finalize your search. Is there anything unclear about the program? Is there a specific area of research you want to learn more about? Are there parts of the application you are unclear about? While these contacts love to get to know prospective students, they get a lot of these inquiries. Make sure you stand out in a good way. Ask specific questions rather than generic inquiries with answers that can be found online. If you attend ABRCMS (3) or SACNAS (4), be sure to seek out program representatives in the exhibitor's hall. If attending the Leadership Alliance's National Symposium (5), don't miss program representatives at the graduate fair. They are there to answer your questions!

Each applicant looks for different things in potential graduate programs, but by considering broadly, you can begin to explore what is most important in your selection and make an informed decision. There are many different resources for information as you research programs. Keep track of it all to help you not only in choosing which programs you want to apply to, but also to help you remember why you applied to each program as you travel and interview in person. Down the road, you'll be grateful that you kept it all straight throughout the entire application season.

[1] https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools
[2] www.brimr.org/NIH_Awards/2017/NIH_Awards_2017.htm
[3] www.abrcms.org
[4] http://sacnas.org/what-we-do/conference/
[5] https://theleadershipalliance25.org/

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Scheduling and Prepping for Entrance Exams

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1) Create a plan for studying and stick to it.

2) Identify GRE resources and start studying.

3) Schedule the GRE well in advance of your application deadline.

By Dr. Elizabeth Bowman
Assistant Director, Graduate Programs in Biomedical Sciences
Vanderbilt University

The GRE is a common component of the graduate school application process, though many programs are dropping this requirement. Read through the application requirements of your schools of interest to see if this is the case for those programs This article explains the GRE, when to take it, how to prepare for it, and other topics relevant to it.

Overview: The GRE is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). For better or worse, most STEM PhD programs still require the GRE for admission. There has been a large national debate about the relevance of the GRE in evaluating prospective students. Some schools have eliminated this requirement, but most programs still require it (1). Before discussing your GRE preparation, you should know that the GRE is only one component of your application. Therefore, you should try to set aside your test anxiety, knowing that other parts of your application are more important than your GRE scores.

When to take the GRE: Plan on taking the GRE at least three months before your first applications are due. That will give you enough time to reschedule the exam in the event of an unforeseen emergency and still be able to send off your official scores.

- 15 -

While most graduate applications are happy to accept your unofficial scores for consideration (which you can view and forward to five schools for free as soon as you finish the test) some programs may require you to send in official reports, which can take 4-6 weeks to process after your test date.

That said, the concepts tested in the GRE are based on fundamentals that you likely covered in high school or college. Thus, you can take the GRE at any point as an undergraduate and do about as well as you likely would do at a later point. You might want to consider taking the GRE at a time that you can focus on studying for the test. Consider studying during the summer when you may be doing research but likely are not taking any other classes.

While you may want to consider taking the test early to give you enough time to retake it, I would like to strongly urge you against planning on taking the GRE multiple times. Instead, prepare well to take the test once and do your best. If you prepared well the first time, it is unlikely that you will do significantly better after multiple attempts. That said, do leave yourself enough time to be able to reschedule the test in case of an unforeseen issue on the day of your test, such as the flu or a family emergency, that may adversely affect your performance on the test.

Cost of the GRE: The GRE costs $205. For more information on budgeting for the exam and your application fees, see "Budgeting for the Application Process" on page 18 of this resource.

How to Prepare for the GRE: Test preparation courses can be expensive. The great news is that there are many excellent, free resources to help you prepare for the GRE, so you should not feel obligated to pay for an expensive prep course. ETS, the company that makes the GRE, has many free resources (2) and the test sites Magoosh and Kaplan have some excellent free resources in addition to premium services for which they charge (3, 4). There is no

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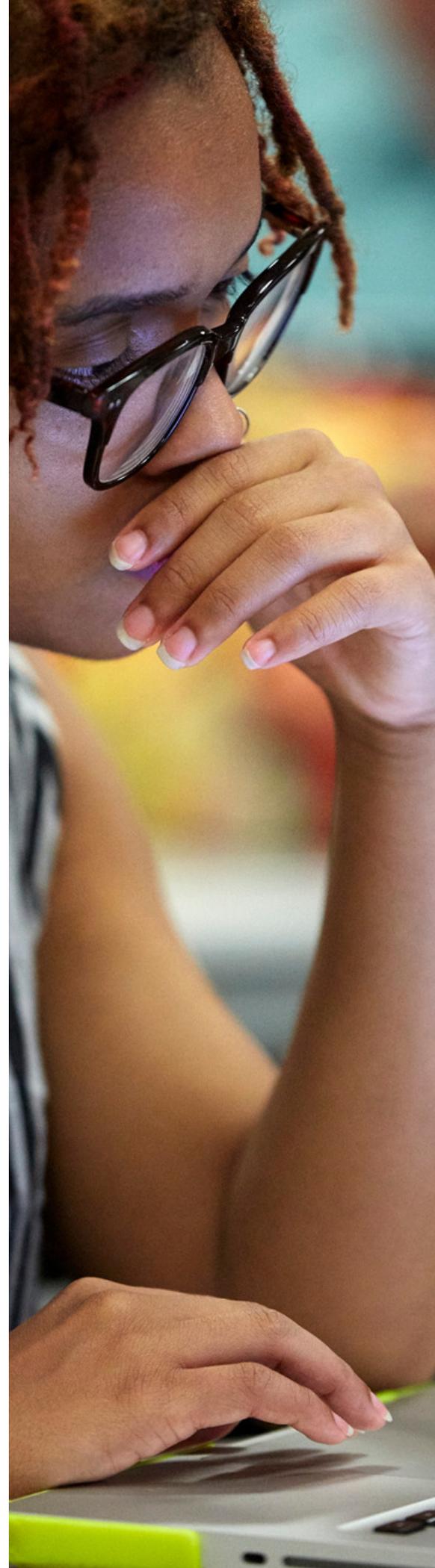
"right way" to prepare for the GRE. My best suggestion would be to set aside time where you are strongly focused on preparing, commit to it, and dive in. Create a schedule and follow it seriously. Buy one prep book to expose you to the content (there really is little difference content-wise between all of the big test prep companies, including ETS), making sure your prep book includes a lot of practice questions. Get used to approaching the questions with the right mentality by seeing questions over and over again through practice tests. You can do anywhere from two weeks of intensive studying to two months of spaced out studying. Either way, if you are using free test prep trials, make sure you only start those when you are intensely preparing.

Some final notes: It should be noted that most MD-PhD programs do not require the GRE as part of the admissions process. Rather, they typically evaluate your MCAT scores alone. Your MCAT score can be one of the most important factors considered in your application, and top programs have fairly stringent score cutoffs. Thus, much of the advice in this article may not be relevant to you, and you should put significantly more effort and preparation into the MCAT.

[1] http://www.asbmb.org/asbmbtoday/201804/Essay/Rao/
[2] www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/
[3] https://gre.magoosh.com/
[4] www.kaptest.com/gre/free/gre-practice

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Budgeting for the Application Process

By Dr. Keisha John
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Many students are surprised by the overall cost of the application process. This article details the major cost categories for applications, as well as some strategies for reducing those costs. The budget for the application process falls into three categories: tests, application fees, and interviews.

Tests: The general GRE test is $205, and subject tests are $150 each. Therefore, a student who needs to take both would need at least $355 just to take the tests. Some students may be eligible for waivers via their school or the GRE fee reduction program which decreases your cost by at least half. In addition to paying to take the exam, all students will need to study for the exam. Most students can prepare on their own using ETS materials or other online resources. These can cost anywhere from $20 to $200. If you need the structured classroom setting to prepare, then a formal class through your university or a test preparation company may be for you. However, be prepared to pay anywhere from $500-$1000 for these classes. Some universities offer discounts to help students enroll. Additionally, some summer programs offer GRE preparation as a component of their program.

ACTION ITEMS

1) Make a budget for the application process.

2) Plan for testing fees, application fees, and, in rare instances, travel fees.

3) Seek out fee waivers at conferences, through summer research programs, and directly from prospective departments.

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To reduce some of these costs, see the GRE Fee Reduction Program (1) as well as ETS's free GRE resources (2).

Application Fees: These fees can range from $50 to $150. For a student applying to ten schools, this could mean another $1500. Some schools and programs have removed this financial barrier. However, if you are applying to schools that still have application fees, there are ways to see if you can waive those fees.

Many summer programs provide waivers to past participants who apply to their graduate school. Some Alliances provide waivers to students at their partner schools. For instance, Leadership Alliance participants can apply to graduate programs at member schools for free (3). You should attend fairs and conferences as most programs provide waivers to students that visit their tables or booths.

You may request a waiver directly from the school. However, be advised that most graduate programs have a statement such as the following regarding fee waivers: Requests for application fee waivers will only be considered for U.S. citizens or permanent residents on the basis of significant financial hardship, or if an applicant has participated or is currently participating in one of the following programs: AmeriCorps, BUILD Program, COMPASS, CORO Fellows, FAF, Fleet Fellows, GEM, IIE/Fulbright, IIPP, IMSD, IRT, JSI, Leadership Alliance, LSAMP, MARC, McNair, Mellon Mays, NSF-REU, NYC Urban Fellows, Peace Corps, PPIA, Questbridge, RISE, SINSI, Truman Fellows, U.S. Military, or Yellow Ribbon Program.

If they don't have a list or a site specifically for fee waivers ask the program coordinator if it is possible for them to provide a waiver.

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Interviews: Students in STEM should expect to have all of the PhD interview costs covered by the program that invites them to interview. The only costs you may incur are local travel or travel less than two hours. Otherwise, the program should arrange all of your travel, housing and meals for your interview visit. If you are applying to a master's program, it is unlikely that you will have an in-person interview and you will be expected to pay for any visits to the university.

In summary, students should budget approximately $1000 to $3000 for the application process. The high end of $3000 is needed if they do not pursue any fee waivers and pay for a test preparation class.

[1] www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/fees/reductions/
[2] www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/
[3] www.theleadershipalliance.org/community/members

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Writing an Outstanding Statement of Purpose

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1) Focus on writing a narrative of how your experiences shaped your interests.

2) Connect this narrative to the program. Cite the research interests of three of them in your statement.

3) Proofread multiple times and ask multiple people to read your statement.

**By Dr. Will Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance**

The statement of purpose is one of the most important elements of your application. This article offers a framework for thinking about your statement that should help you write a memorable and effective one.

Your statement of purpose is your only opportunity to tell application reviewers your story in your own words. Knowing your story makes your application much more memorable and, as a result, helps you stand out from the larger application pool. Moreover, it is your best opportunity to tell the application reviewers why you are a good fit for their program. They are planning to invest significant resources in the graduate students that they admit. Knowing that you are applying to their programs for compelling reasons is a central motivation for every decision to accept.

Focus on articulating three kinds of fit:

1) The fit between you and your chosen field (i.e., why you want to get a PhD in your chosen field and are likely to excel in it). 2) The fit between you and the program to which you are applying (i.e., why this particular program will be the best place for you to go). 3) The fit between the program and your plans after graduate school (i.e., why this particular program will be the best launching pad for your research and teaching career).

- 21 -

Think of the statement of purpose as a narrative, with you as the protagonist. Part of that narrative is your story of who you are, why you want to get a PhD in your chosen field, and the experiences that led to and deepened your desire for getting a PhD. The other part of the narrative describes why going to the program to which you are applying will result in your becoming a thriving scholar in your chosen field.

To the end of telling that narrative, many statements of purpose (1) follow a similar, four-part structure.

1) Introduce yourself and your motivations. Articulate your fascination with the questions that bring you to your field of study and root that fascination in an experience or set of experiences. You are the protagonist of this narrative. You need to show your readers what motivates you on this journey.

2) Develop your backstory. Here you should summarize your previous academic, work, and volunteer experiences. For PhD programs, be sure to highlight any research experiences you have. This section should not read like a laundry list of the items already on your resume. Pick the most important experiences and highlight them.

3) Connect your backstory to your next chapter. Elaborate upon your experiences to show why they are relevant to graduate school. If you are highlighting your accomplishments as an undergraduate, focus on why they have put you in a position to thrive in graduate school. If you have taken time off for work or a post-baccalaureate course of study, explain how those experiences have prepared you for graduate school, particularly if you are changing fields.

4) Preview your next chapter. Describe what, if admitted, you plan to study. Be specific both about the questions you would like to research and why the program is a good fit for that. Carefully study the current research of the faculty and be sure to highlight the research interests of three of them in your statement.
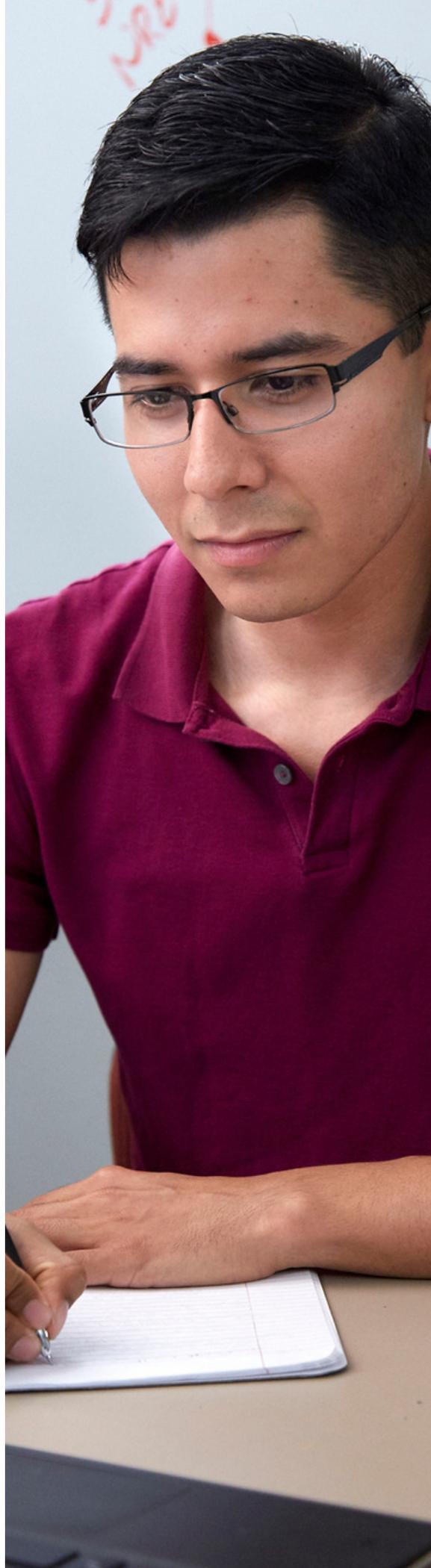
Throughout this narrative, be as specific as possible about your experiences and intentions. Use a formal, but conversational tone. Do not try to impress with technical jargon or disciplinary vocabulary. Be selective in your choices of what to highlight. You will not have enough space to follow a "more is better" strategy when choosing experiences and interests to emphasize. If you have a poor grade or two on your transcript, feel empowered to explain the reasons behind that grade if it reinforces your overall narrative as a researcher. For example, particularly intense volunteering may have distracted you from your coursework while also sparking the research interest that has led you to apply to grad school. If the explanation for the grade is personal, such as an illness or a death in the family, try to address it in an addendum to your application.

Be sure to proofread multiple times and have multiple people review your statement. Ask roommates, friends, or coworkers to read for clarity and grammar. Ask one of your undergraduate mentors to give you feedback on how you are describing the three kinds of fit discussed above. Above all, be true to who you are, what you have done, and what you want to do. If you get accepted on the basis of an inauthentic statement, you will likely find yourself in a graduate program that is a poor fit for you and will stifle your growth as a scholar. You want to join a program in which you will thrive. A compelling, authentic statement of purpose will help you toward that goal.

[1] https://www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/graduate-school-statement-of-purpose-sample/

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Revising Your CV, Resume, or Biosketch

By Dr. Chloe N. Poston
Associate Director
The Leadership Alliance

A CV or curriculum vitae is an extended resume that accompanies your GRE scores, academic transcripts, and personal statement to complete your graduate school application. Your CV is a great place for you to highlight your academic history, research interests, relevant work experience, honors, and accomplishments. It is also a great place for you to demonstrate extensive knowledge in the field and your academic potential. Use the tips below to develop a CV that will make your application stand out.

1. Sections Matter: Most CVs will have education and employment information, but you will need to create additional sections to really tell your story. (1) For example, if you have extensive volunteer experience, then you should have a "community service" section. If you have been a TA, then you should add a section on teaching experience. Other sections to consider include conference presentations, awards and honors, publications, and leadership roles. If you don't have at least two bullets for a section, consider renaming it something broader.

ACTION ITEMS

1) Use sections to highlight your experiences and research skills.

2) Focus on key accomplishments rather than making a laundry list.

3) Keep the information relevant to graduate school.

4) Proofread, proofread, proofread.

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2. Accomplishments Come First. You want the reader to be immediately impressed by you and your work to date, so you should place your proudest academic achievements first. Often this comes in the form of an honors and awards section that appears just below the education section. Remember that your CV should show that you will be a great academic, so scholarships, conference presentations, and publications should also be featured prominently on the first page of your CV.

3. Stay Relevant: Your CV for graduate school should be focused on your academic career. The jobs you've held that are not relevant to your research should not appear on your CV. You should also focus on your undergraduate (and post-baccalaureate career if applicable), rather than your time in high school.

4. Proofread and Format. For some people who are considering your application, the CV may be the primary document they use to review your academic history. Proofread for typos that could make you appear careless and create clean formatting that is easy on the eyes. These are two small steps that can leave a negative impression when overlooked. Ask someone else to review your resume for typos and formatting suggestions. Then find an additional person and ask them to read your resume in three minutes. Time them and then ask them questions about you as a candidate. This exercise will highlight which information is readily accessible and memorable.

[1] www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/how-to-write-a-cv-for-graduate-school/

Contacting Your Letter Writers

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

By Dr. Keisha John
Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences University of Virginia and Dr. Ja'Wanda Grant
Special Assistant to the Provost for Scholar Development and Institutional Alliances, Xavier University of Louisiana

Having effective letters of recommendation is crucial for successful applications. This article explains who to ask for letters of recommendation, as well as how to ask for them and follow up on your requests.

Who to ask : Your potential reference writers should know you in an academic or research capacity. If you are applying to a PhD program, your primary letter writers should be individuals that can speak about your research capabilities and those who have taught you in one or more class in which you received a B or better grade. If you are applying to a summer research or internship program, your primary letter writers should be instructors for courses in which you performed well, supervisors who know your work ethic and problem-solving abilities, and other professional references who can speak to your interest in research and how it connects with your long-term goals.

If you have not already done so, start developing professional relationships with potential letter writers. During summer research experiences off campus you should make every effort to meet with the faculty member whose name is on the laboratory equipment.

ACTION ITEMS

1. **Identify potential writers** who can write strong letters.

2. **Ask them at least three months in advance** of the application deadline.

3. **Send timely reminders** if your writers are slow to upload your letters.

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Yes, you may work closely with a graduate student or postdoc. However, the letter should come from the faculty member. Therefore, schedule one-on-one time with the faculty mentor to discuss your progress and your summer, undergraduate and graduate goals. Ask if they have suggestions regarding classes, majors, and potential graduate programs. Look for other alignments, not only with the research but your personal and academic journeys, hobbies or interests. Do stay in touch once you have completed the summer. Three recommended messages are: 1) a thank you and update once your next semester starts, 2) a holiday greeting, and 3) a spring semester update.

For references on your campus, we highly recommend that you visit professors during their office hours and talk about anything other than passing the next exam or that particular class. Instead, you can discuss your progress towards career goals and ask them about their trajectory. Given that you are on the same campus you have more opportunities to develop and sustain your professional relationship. Make use of every opportunity for them to get to know you in and out of the classroom.

How and when to ask: Time and context are very important. Schedule a virtual or in-person meeting to request the letter. You should reach out at least three months before the due date of the letter. For seniors, this may mean speaking with them in the spring of your junior year or during the summer. Ask your letter writers if they can provide a STRONG LETTER of recommendation. Please do ask this question. Also, you should come to the meeting prepared with a draft of your resume as well as your statement of purpose. Share with the letter writer why you are asking for the letter and how you believe they can advocate for you. Provide examples that may be used for the letter. For example, you can ask that your letter writer discuss the creativity and initiative you displayed when you read papers and developed a solution for a difficult experiment. Perhaps your research design is still being used by the lab which speaks to your ability to create new research methods. You can discuss passions you have pursued while maintaining a strong academic and research record. Therefore, share your formal and informal

leadership roles outside the laboratory or classroom. In addition, if you have anything in your record that you believe may be viewed as a blemish or red flag, please discuss this with them. Your letter writers may be able to convey better why your first semester grades or less than expected exam scores are not true reflectors of your accomplishments and future potential.

Once you have had this meeting and you are confident that they will provide a strong letter, follow up with an email within 24 hours of the meeting. In the email include the list of applications with their deadlines, your resume, statement of purpose and a bulleted list of potential topics to include in their letter. We strongly emphasize being both exhaustive and detailed in your list of applications and their deadlines. You can do your writers a significant service by letting them know when, how, and where they should be sending their letters of recommendation.. Also, let them know that you will add their information to the application as soon as it is open. Once the applications are open (typically in July or August for PhD programs) provide the recommender's information as most of the systems send an initial email as well as reminders. If the application requires letter submissions via postal mail, provide the letter writer with pre-addressed, postmarked envelopes, as appropriate.

Reminders are necessary: Many online applications have trackers for application completion. You should use these to check on the status of your letters. We recommend that you send a reminder if your letter is not submitted two weeks before the due date. This message can be a simple email asking if they need any additional information to complete their letter. You can also send it as an update informing them that you have submitted your required application components and that you are grateful to have them serve as a letter writer. The next, and hopefully final, reminder should come two days before the due date. At this point, you need to be a bit more direct, as outlined in the following example.

Dear Professor X,
I do hope all is well. I am emailing to remind you that the recommendation letter you agreed to submit for my application to XYZ is due in two days. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to ensure the timely submission of your letter. Thank you for your continued support. Sincerely, Student.
Please remember to thank them once they have submitted each letter. Handwritten thank you notes are highly suggested when possible.

In summary, only ask those who know you in an academic or research capacity if you want a strong letter. Give them all of the resources they need to advocate for you and provide adequate time for them to compose a strong letter. Send gentle reminders within the two-week window for submission if they have not completed their letter. Thank them after they have submitted your letter of recommendation.

Filling Out and Submitting Your Applications

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1. Inventory everything you have to do.

2. Manage these tasks with a Gantt chart.

3. Reward yourself for finishing tasks and meeting goals.

By Dr. William Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance

You can do yourself a huge favor while simultaneously increasing your chances of getting into graduate school just by having a practical plan for filling out and submitting your graduate school applications. You will be doing yourself a favor by avoiding the terrible panic of filling out an application last minute. Moreover, you will be increasing your chances of being accepted by ensuring that your application has minimal errors - from typos to using the name of the wrong university in your application. This article describes approaches for keeping yourself on track.

Start with an inventory of all the individual application elements for each of your applications, the due dates for each of the applications, and whether they are rolling. Knowing what you have to do and dates by when you have to complete tasks will allow you to "work backward" to plan when to start them. To complete this inventory for each application, read the application instructions, the FAQs, and click through the online application as a "dry run" without submitting anything.

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Be sure to keep an eye on tasks that are required, but are not part of the application system, such as reaching out to letter writers and filling out your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (1).

Next, assess the time that each element will take. Remember that most applications take several hours to fill out aside from the time it takes to write your statement of purpose, secure your letters of recommendation, and request transcripts. Include time for editing, checking, and rechecking each element of your application. Typos and other errors can contribute to a perception among members of the admissions committee that you don't follow through on projects with diligence and care.

Then organize the tasks into a Gantt Chart (2) by start date and end date. The end date for every element of the application should be at least two weeks before the deadline. If the application is rolling, prioritize it and try to finish it early. To determine the start date, block out double the amount of time you think each task will take you if all goes well. Unexpected delays always crop up. For items that require multiple drafts, such as a statement of purpose, include each draft as well as reviews by other people as separate tasks.

To keep yourself on schedule, enter these dates and track your progress toward them with an app like Trello (3), Google Keep, (4) or even an old-fashioned desk calendar. Hold yourself accountable to your application calendar. Pick rewards for reaching goals (5).

Finally, keep the faith. Filling out applications is arduous but will pay off in the end.

[1] https://fafsa.ed.gov/
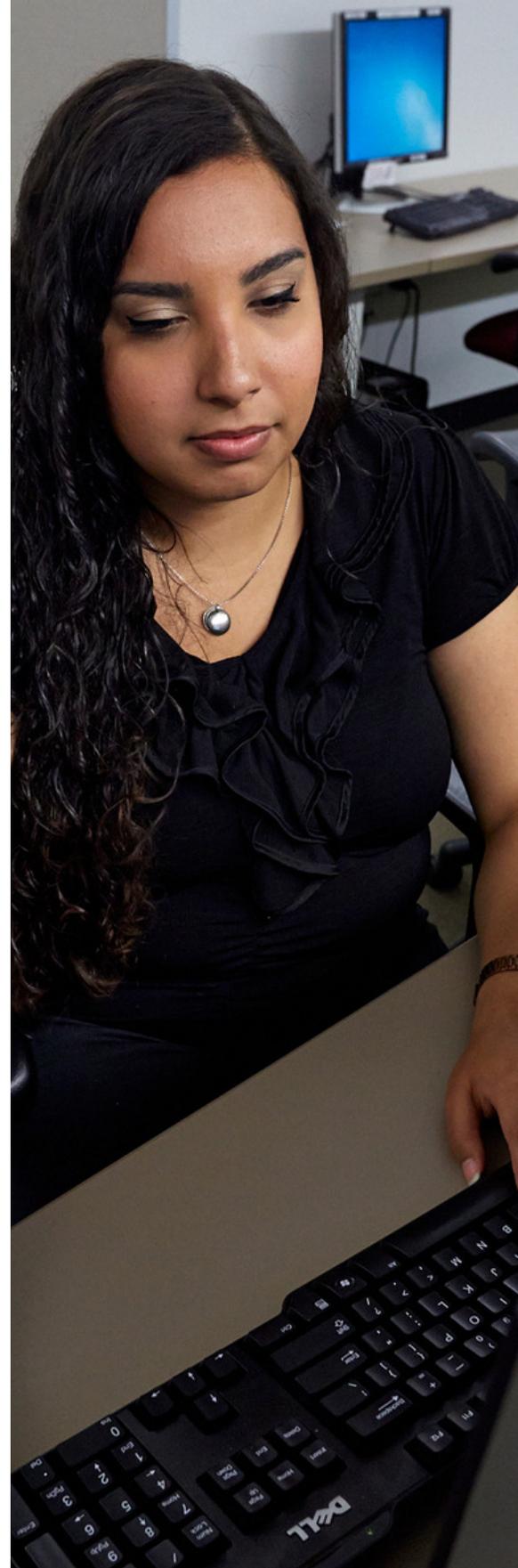[2] www.projectmanager.com/gantt-chart
[3] https://trello.com/
[4] https://keep.google.com
[5] https://medium.com/thrive-global/5-ways-to-recognize-and-reward-your-progress-1d85e346438

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The Admissions Committee Process

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

ACTION ITEMS

1) Gather available information about the committee's decision-making process.

2) Focus on telling a compelling story about why you "fit."

3) Bear in mind that there is no way to know exactly what a committee is looking for in a given year.

By Dr. Elizabeth Bowman
Assistant Director, Graduate Programs in Biomedical Sciences
**Vanderbilt University**

The admissions committee process is an opaque one. While the way committees approach the review process is entirely out of your hands, it can be helpful to know what goes on behind the scenes. This article highlights the admissions committee process and what that process means for you.

When I applied to graduate programs, I hit submit to then be left eagerly waiting to hear from the institution. I asked myself a lot of questions: Do they know I've just submitted my application? Who is going to see it? Do they know how much time and effort I poured into this? What parts of the application will be read? How do I know whether I've sent all of the appropriate information? It felt like I was sending my effort into an abyss only to learn the result of my application without fully understanding the process. Here, I will describe how the admissions process is generally handled after submission and explain how committees consider your application.

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To start, many programs take note of applications and sort them in batches rather than individually. These may be small batches throughout the application season, checking new applications every week or so. This approach is often referred to as rolling admission if the applications are also reviewed throughout the season. Alternatively, applications may be sorted and reviewed in one big batch after the application deadline has passed. Thus, your application may sit unreviewed for some weeks or months after you hit the submit button.

Unfortunately, not every application may be read fully by the admissions committee. Some programs in the country receive too many applications to review each aspect meaningfully, so many programs follow a triage during the review process. For example, some programs have minimum criteria, such as GPA or experience cutoffs, that must be reached for the committee to review an application fully. Not every program has cutoffs, but you should make sure you are aware of any thresholds that a program might have so you will only apply to programs where your application will be reviewed.

After applications are sorted, they are then shared with the admissions committee. Committees are largely composed of faculty from the program who teach graduate and undergraduate students, manage their research program, write grants to maintain their lab funding, and squeeze other administrative responsibilities into their packed schedules. Given their busy schedules, the individuals who serve on these committees decide on a reviewed application fairly quickly. During the review, the committee is comparing your application to the dozens or hundreds of other applications they are reading. Thus, each application does not necessarily stand on its own merit but rather in comparison to the whole pool and only the best advance to the next step. Your task is to stand out.

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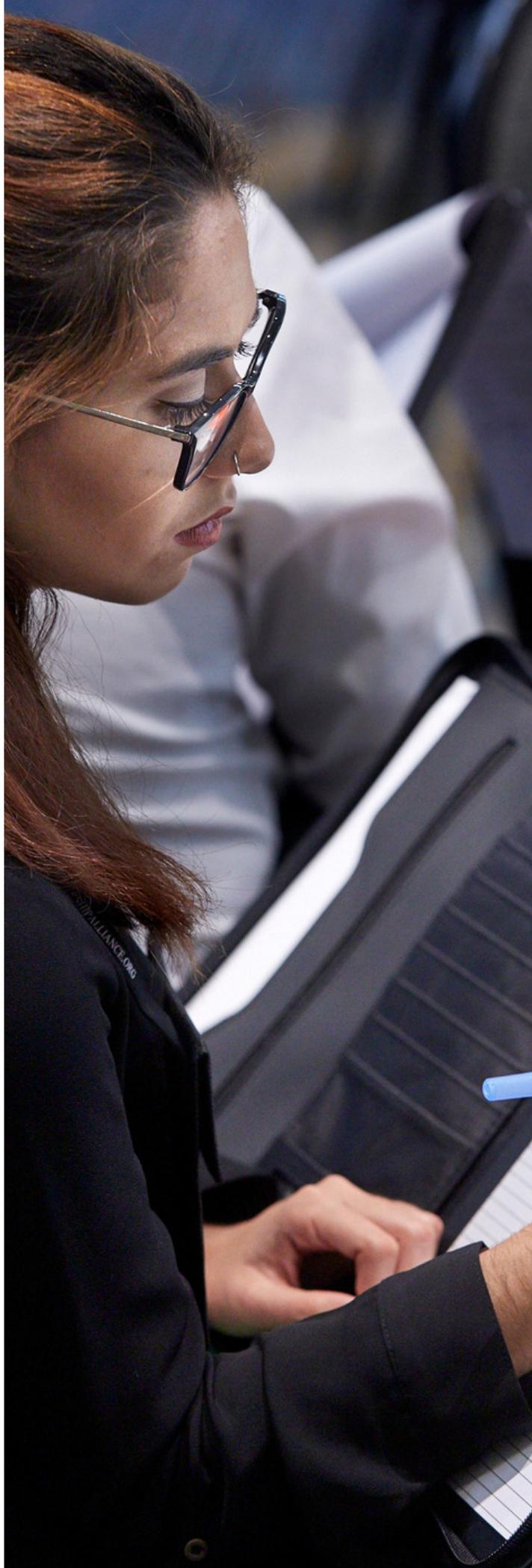
If your application makes it to the committee, it will likely be read in depth by at least three faculty members. Some committee members may put a really strong emphasis on the academics, some may focus most on previous research, and others may pay more attention to your journey and motivations for pursuing graduate school (see page 21). Highlight your strengths and the experiences that are driving your desire to attend graduate school so they are noticed by the committee. When the admissions committee meets to discuss the application reviews, most applications are discussed relatively quickly. If there is a consensus among reviewers, the details of the application are often not discussed in detail. However, if there are conflicting reviews, then the committee will often review the application as a group at a meeting and make a decision there.

So what does this process mean for you? First, take the time to inquire about what the committee considers important before preparing your application. Second, if your application makes it to the committee, a decision on your submitted application will be made after several faculty review it in depth, so your effort and care in assembling the application (see page 29) will be noticed. Finally, as much as the process may be perceived as unpredictable, admissions decisions are made with careful consideration, so take the time to detail your experiences and intentions (see page 24).

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Interviewing

By Dr. Chloe N. Poston
Associate Director
The Leadership Alliance

Once you've applied to graduate programs, the next step for many programs will be an invitation to campus for an interview. Often these interviews will be a full day of meetings with professors, postdocs, and graduate students in the department. By using the tips below, you can impress the department and learn more about the program.

1. Do your research before you arrive. When you are invited to interview, try to get the names of the people who you will speak with during the interview. Then, learn as much as possible about each person's research and career trajectory. This information will help you to have more meaningful conversations during the interview day. It will also demonstrate your interest in being a part of the department.

2. Dress appropriately. While most labs tend to have a casual dress code, you should still plan to dress as if you are attending an interview. A full suit is not required, but you should plan to dress business casual (1). Your safest bet is to go for dress-pants and a collared shirt. Remember to wear comfortable shoes as you will likely be walking a great deal around campus.

ACTION ITEMS

1) Develop a list of questions.

2) Practice your responses to common questions.

3) Dress professionally and remain professional at all times.

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3. Come with a list of questions. The interview is a chance for you to learn about the department. You should have a list of questions about research groups, funding, and campus and department culture. Not only will you learn more about the place you may call home for the next 5-7 years, but your curiosity will also show interviewers that you are carefully considering your options and taking the process seriously.

4. Practice your responses. An easy way to get rid of nerves before an interview is to develop responses to common questions (2). For example, most people will ask you to tell them about yourself. This question is a great opportunity for you to tell your professional story. Your response should include your accomplishments, and describe why you are interested in pursuing a PhD in that specific department. While your response should not be rehearsed, you should know the key points you want to make. This technique can also be used to answer the question, "what are your research interests?" Providing polished answers to these questions can set you apart from other applicants.

5. Remain professional at all times. You may think that the interview begins when you sit in a room with professors and answer questions, but graduate school interviews begin the moment you come to campus. Everyone you meet is evaluating you in some capacity. This group includes the graduate students and postdocs you may meet over lunch or a mixer. If alcohol is served, limit yourself to one drink and focus instead on networking with people in the room. By leaving a positive impression on everyone you encounter on campus, you are more likely to have a favorable admissions decision.

[1] www.thebalancecareers.com/what-is-business-casual-attire-2061168
[2] www.themuse.com/advice/4-common-interview-questions-and-4-perfect-answers

The Post Interview Process

By Dr. Chloe N. Poston
The Leadership Alliance

Interviews for graduate programs are a great way for you to learn more about the department, potential research mentors and the resources available through the university. In some cases, the interview may be one hour and, in other cases, there may be a full day of meetings. Interview days can be exhausting, but there's still more to do after you've left a campus visit. This article details some simple, but effective, actions to take.

Send a thank you email (1).

Professors and graduate school administrators are incredibly busy people. Expressing your appreciation for the time that they spent with you will earn you bonus points. This follow-up also helps people remember who you are. In the note, you can include more information about a topic that was discussed in the interview or ask additional questions that came to mind since you left.

Organize your thoughts on the department

If you are visiting several universities, you will want to keep track of how you felt each interview went, who you met with, and what you liked (and disliked) about the visit (2). Remember, interviews

ACTION ITEMS

1. Send a thank you email to the program representatives you met.

2. Organize your notes before you forget any of the information you acquired.

3. Stay connected through email, LinkedIn, or TLAConnect.

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are a two-way street, and you should have lots of questions. The place where you earn your PhD will be your new home for 4-7 years. You want to make sure you will be comfortable there. After the interview write down a few notes for your reference. Try considering the following questions as a start: Was the environment welcoming? Did you meet with a professor who could be a good research mentor? Was the city a place where you could see yourself living? How would you be funded?

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If you take these notes within 48 hours of your campus visit, you'll be prepared to compare departments side by side when it's time to make a decision.

Stay connected

Networking is a large part of a research career. Visit day is an excellent opportunity to meet and engage with current and future scholars in your field. Even if you decide not to attend a university, staying in contact with the people you meet there could help you learn about new opportunities in the future. LinkedIn (3) is a powerful site for managing professional connections. Create a profile and search for the names of people that you've met. Then you can invite them to connect with you. Some people get several requests to connect, so change the generic request to something more personal that reminds the person of who you are and where you met. Once you are connected, you'll receive notifications anytime that person posts an article or shares a new opportunity. People you are connected to will also be able to follow your career trajectory and contact you.

By completing these three steps, you will remain memorable to the department, have the tools to compare the visit to other institutions and grow your professional network.

1 www.gradschools.com/get-informed/applying-graduate-school/essay-writing/grad-school-interview-thank-you-letter
2 www.themuse.com/advice/the-simple-tool-that-will-help-you-pick-the-right-grad-school
3 http://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-make-the-most-of-linkedin-2014-2

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Choosing Between Grad School Offers

IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATH

By Dr. Carina Beck
Director, Allen Yarnell Center for Student Success
Montanta State University

Your planning, due diligence, and hard work have paid off! You've received offers, and now it is time to make some decisions. This article offers guidance on how to choose between offers.

While there is variance in notification by school and program, you may begin learning if you've been accepted into doctoral level programs as early as late January (depending upon the school's application deadline). Generally, schools are obligated to notify you no later than April 1st if you are going to receive a financial package (scholarship, assistantship, waiver, etc.). Typically, this means you have until April 15th to notify the school if you are going to accept their offer of admission and financial package. Master's level programs tend to have slightly later dates and rolling deadlines for notification. Be sure on your application preparation spreadsheet to note and understand the dates and terms of notification – they are typically published on the institution's/department's webpage. This "timing" information will help guide your decisions. Rejection letters tend to be slow in coming if they ever do arrive.

Do not accept the first offer, even if it is from your top choice of programs. Wait, consult mentors/advisors, ask good questions

ACTION ITEMS

1. Be patient; many schools do not notify you until late in the spring.

2. Don't feel pressure to accept an offer immediately.

3. Weigh competing offers on a variety of scales.

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and perform appropriate due diligence before accepting. You may feel pressured to accept, but take your time, consider alternatives, and follow up with questions.

If you've received an offer, but not from your top choice, it is appropriate for you to communicate with your top school(s) and advise them of your offer(s). They will likely at that time provide you with information to help guide your decision (you are being considered for an offer, waitlisted, or won't receive an offer). If you've received several offers, begin to quickly narrow your choices to no more than two or three options. Identify the priorities for why you would accept the offer (e.g., school's reputation, opportunity to study under a specific researcher/scholar, research program credentials, program culture or "feel," opportunities for publication, financial package, location, opportunities for employment, etc.). Create a "pros and cons" list or some form of comparison to consider your options methodically. Visit with your mentors/advisors. Develop a ranking scale that is personal to you and your criteria which will eventually help you determine the best fit for you.

Once you've determined your best fit, notify your top choice program with enthusiasm and respect. Similarly, promptly and professionally notify the other schools of your decision to decline their offer. Both communications are equally important and must be approached with tact, respect, and mindfulness. You have taken the time to build and establish these networks and no doubt, whether you choose to become a faculty member or work in industry or government, you will likely interact with faculty from schools who have either rejected your application or whose offer you have rejected. Networks are hard earned and can be easily dismantled; be thoughtful in your decisions and resulting communication.

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Timeline for Applying to Grad School

IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, TECHNOLOGY, AND MATH

14 months before applications are due

12 months before applications are due

10 months before applications are due

9 months before applications are due

6 months before applications are due

3 months before applications are due

2 weeks before applications are due

After the New Year

☐ Take stock of your graduate school options

- Have at least three conversations with people who have pursued the degree in which you are interested

☐ Start gathering information on prospective programs

- Conduct online searches of program websites
- Set up informational interviews with representatives of prospective programs
- Identify at least three faculty with whom you would be interested in working

☐ Create your application list and application plan

- Narrow your list to a manageable number of schools (at least 5 or 6, but no more than 12)
- Seek out fee waivers online, through summer program participation, and from school representatives at conferences

☐ Schedule and start prepping for your entrance exams

- Schedule your exams at least 3 months in advance of your application deadlines, though it is recommended to take them earlier, during a window of time in which you can thoroughly prepare

☐ Start assembling the core elements of your application

- Draft your personal statement
- Revise your CV, resume, or biosketch
- Select or write your writing sample

☐ Ask your letter writers for letters and let them know where you will be applying

☐ Finish filling out and submitting your applications

☐ Be on the look out for interview requests, if applicable

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