Distinguishing Graduate and Professional School

Though the distinction is not always strict, it is important to know the difference between the different kinds of programs available after completion of a B.A. or B.S. “Graduate programs” and “Professional programs” tend to have somewhat different ideas about what they want from applicants, what their application requirements are, and how their programs are designed.

Graduate school generally involves seeking an M.A., M.S., or Ph.D. in an academic field. Some schools and disciplines offer a terminal M.A./M.S. which is a program designed for students who simply want to earn their Masters. Many programs however are designed around a Ph.D. track and simply award the M.A. or M.S. to students at some point along the way. Terminal M.A./M.S. programs are frequently “less academic” and more like professional school programs, but even so, many M.A./M.S. programs and most Ph.D. programs do not aim to train you for a particular job. In general, graduate students in academic programs are oriented toward scholarly research and university teaching rather than in particular vocational skills. Graduate programs vary widely in their degree requirements, time-to-degree (number of years to earn either the M.A., M.S. or Ph.D.), and their expectations for student work while in the program. It is important to know your own career goals and pick a program that is appropriate to them. Consult faculty, a Counseling Assistant, or graduate advisors for assistance.

Professional school (J.D. for Law, M.D. for Medicine, M.B.A. for Business, M.S.W. for Social Work, etc.) is geared toward a particular profession, and often the degree is a prerequisite for work in the field such as for doctors or lawyers. On the other hand, some professional programs offer a general program of study in a particular area with a range of different career paths as in the case of M.B.A. programs. Professional students often spend less time on independent research and more time learning a set body of material. There may be more emphasis on particular job skills such as work within teams or groups, presentations, preparation for state or professional examinations, and so on.
IS GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL RIGHT FOR YOU?

What are your motivations for attending graduate or professional school? Be honest with yourself. You should choose a program because you are working toward a goal, not looking for an “easy way out.” Going to graduate or professional school to avoid choosing a career path only delays this important decision and may ultimately make it more difficult. Here are some tips and questions to consider:

Graduate or professional school can be a satisfying and valuable experience if:

- You have a clear sense of your career goal and an advanced degree is the ticket to entry into that field. College or university teaching and research, law, medicine, and dentistry are some areas in which education beyond the baccalaureate level is required. Primary or secondary teaching requires post-baccalaureate certification, as do various forms of counseling and social work. Talk with people in the field in order to determine what kind of degree is necessary for the work you want to do.

- You realize that you will have to put much more work into study and research than you did as an undergraduate.

- In the case of graduate school, you want to immerse yourself in the study of an academic discipline for the love of it, and feel ready to start “producing” work in that field as opposed to just learning about it.

- In the case of professional school, you are ready to demonstrate your maturity and commitment to a particular profession. You are interested in the curriculum and are prepared to study and participate actively.

Think twice if you are considering graduate or professional school for one of these reasons:

- You love college and just cannot bear to leave it behind; i.e., you are looking for “College II.”

- You have no clear career goal but see graduate school as a way to “find yourself”. Reality check: the post-baccalaureate level can sometimes be a harsh competitive environment. Students are expected to have clearly defined interests leading to an area of specialization. Graduate and professional school often requires students to work hard and to work on their own. You will need self-discipline and motivation to overcome the challenging and difficult demands placed on you.

- You are postponing the job search. Remember, a graduate degree does not guarantee a job.

- You think that there is nothing you can do “with a major in....” Regardless of your major, keep in mind that your undergraduate training at UCLA has equipped you with many skills that are highly valued in the workplace. You may be giving yourself excuses when you should be getting yourself a job. The Career Center can help you discover career options geared to your major and interests.

- You are responding to pressure from friends, family or professors; if this is the case, reconsider or delay your decision. Your own interest and motivation for professional or graduate school is what is really important. You need to develop the maturity to know your own mind.

Tip: If you are thinking about graduate school but do not feel that your academic credentials are good enough to get you into the program you want, here are some ideas:

1. Take extension or community college courses. For example, if you know that you would be taking Calculus and Statistics in Business school anyway, take those courses on your own and allow yourself time to decide if an M.B.A. is what you really want.

2. Look for a “bridge” program such as a terminal M.A. program. If you do well there, the letters of recommendation and grades may weigh more heavily than your UCLA record.

3. Work in a lab or as a research assistant in your field. Sometimes an association with an important person in the field goes a long way.
GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL: NOW OR LATER?

Once you decide to pursue a graduate degree, the next question is: should I go straight to graduate or professional school or take some time off? There are no hard and fast rules. It is a good idea to talk with faculty, prospective employers, and students currently pursuing the programs of interest to you in order to hear their perspectives on immediate entry versus delay.

You may want to consider these questions before making your decision:

- Are you reasonably sure of your career goals, or is there a chance that you could change your mind after a taste of the working world? Would work experience help clarify ambiguous career goals?

- Would your application be enhanced by waiting? The application process can be very time-consuming and you may be able to do a better application when you are not in the middle of your senior year. Also, senior grades, a test prep course, or an additional year to cultivate faculty recommendations might improve your application. Some professional schools are as interested in your background as your "numbers." Most Ph.D. programs, however, are interested almost exclusively in academic credentials, research experience, and goals.

- How much will your job and salary be enhanced by a graduate degree? Remember, if you pursue a degree only because you anticipate financial rewards, you may be disappointed.

- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break? Or, would it be beneficial to have a little rest before facing several more years of hard studying?

- What are the direct or indirect costs of graduate school? Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend a program? Would working for a year or two greatly improve your standard of living while in graduate school (e.g. allow you to buy a computer or a car)?

Combining Work and Graduate or Professional School

- Many recent graduates, strapped with sizable debts from their college years, forego the pursuit of an advanced degree and look for employment as soon as possible. One solution is finding employment with major corporations that offer tuition assistance programs as part of their benefits package. These programs allow employees to take courses and earn degrees at local universities while they work full-time at a career. Usually these classes must be taken during evenings and weekends.

- Even without tuition assistance, many people combine work and graduate or professional school out of necessity and/or desire. While work can add to the difficulty of graduate or professional school, it may also provide some resources (computer, research site, etc.).

- Ph.D. students who receive "funding" usually work as research or teaching assistants and are paid with salaries and tuition reimbursements.

Tip: If you decide to postpone graduate or professional school for a while, don’t fall out of the loop.

1. Keep in touch with your professors. You may need them for letters of recommendation, but you might also just need advice even after you’ve started a program. Sometimes someone not affiliated with your program can be a valuable resource.

2. Subscribe to a journal in your field or go to the library periodically so that you can keep up. Then if you decide to go back to school, you won’t feel as though you are out-of-date.
Once you decide that graduate or professional school fits into your career and life plans, you need to find out as much as possible about the programs and professors in your field. Early in your junior year, check directories for overviews and rankings of graduate and professional programs around the country.

**For Graduate school:** Usually there is no obvious "best" program. National rankings do exist, however each is based on different criteria. Check several. Usually some consensus exists about the "Top Ten". If you are hoping to become a professor, find out how recent Ph.D.s from different programs have done in the job market. Talk to faculty and ask their advice on specific programs. Read journals in your field to see which professors are doing the kind of research and publishing that interests you. You should seek to match your interests with the strengths of the department. It is of no use being at the "Number One" department in the country if they have no faculty working in the sub-field that interests you.

**For Professional school:** Match your interests with the best schools you can get into. A school in the region where you hope to work may be helpful. Check how recent graduates from prospective programs have done on the job market. What is the overall program environment and does it fit your personality?

**Criteria for Evaluating Graduate and Professional Programs**

It is important to consult a Counseling Assistant or faculty advisor. Below are some initial considerations.

**Admission.** What criteria are used to evaluate and select students? How important are GPA and test scores? Would work experience improve your odds? What types of students does the program attract?

**Programs offered.** What specializations are available? Is there a focus on theory and original research, or does it stress the practical application of knowledge and skills? Does the program provide practicums or internships? Is the curriculum structured or flexible?

**Faculty.** Does the department have prestigious scholars who you could work with personally? Are they "has-beens" or are they still actively publishing? What is the student-faculty ratio? Do current graduate students give good reports on their experiences with the particular professors you want to work with? Do students work on research projects with faculty and possibly co-author publications?

**Reputation.** Is the program highly ranked? Are recent graduates successful in the job market?

**Philosophy of Education.** What is the average (mean) and median length of time spent in the program ("time-to-degree")? What is the attrition rate? Is there equal material and non-material support for Master’s and Ph.D. students? Is there a friendly environment for students of color, gay/lesbian students, women, married students, students with children, etc.? Is there a competitive environment, or is it more team-oriented? How are students evaluated?

**Multicultural Opportunities.** What is faculty and student composition? Are foreign exchange programs available? Are multicultural concerns substantially integrated into the curriculum?

**Facilities.** Is there a good library for your research needs? Are there adequate computer facilities and labs? Do you like the campus? How are students housed? Are there good transportation options?

**Cost.** What are the tuition and fees? What is the standard-of-living for the area? What financial aid is available in the form of loans, scholarships, internships, and work study funds? What about teaching and research assistantships? How much is non-resident tuition? How long does it take to establish residency? Is there research support such as travel grants and library fellowships?

**Size.** Look both at the department and the university. A large institution will have more extensive facilities and libraries; smaller departments will offer more personal attention and a sense of community.

**State Regulations/Residency Requirements.** Many state universities give admission preferences to in-state residents. Residence regulations apply to your legal residence and may affect the cost of tuition.
Career Assistance. What career planning and job search assistance is available through the department? Does the program provide real work experience? For academic programs, will you have an opportunity to gain teaching experience?

Networking Contacts. Does the program offer opportunities to mingle with professionals in your field? Does the program have a well-developed alumni office?

How to Evaluate Graduate and Professional Programs

Review catalogs. The Career Center has a comprehensive collection of California college and university catalogs and selected holdings of out-of-state institutions. The Microfiche College Catalog Collection, which encompasses most US and foreign colleges and universities, is available in Powell library. You can write and request catalogs directly from the programs you are considering.

Read Journal Articles/Books. For graduate school: After obtaining faculty rosters from schools, read articles by the various professors in your area and pick out work that impresses you. E-mail or phone those faculty members who you would most like to work with. Are they receptive?

Graduate Advisors. Most departments and schools have staff members who serve as advisors. These people can be an important source of information about the program and can also put you in touch with faculty and both current and former students as part of your decision-making process.

Visit the Campus. Perhaps nothing can help you get a better perspective than an actual visit. Are faculty and staff easily accessible? Do students and faculty interact productively? Do the school, campus, and community satisfy your lifestyle and extracurricular needs? When you visit campus, be aware that you should be selling yourself as well as evaluating the program. When you meet faculty, convey intelligence, confidence, and professionalism since these faculty influence admissions decisions.

Talk to Current Students. The Admissions Office or departmental graduate advisor can arrange meetings or provide names and phone numbers if you are unable to visit the campus. Beyond basic questions, you’ll want to determine how responsive the school is to student concerns and opinions. Do students serve on committees? How well and by what means are students informed of academic, administrative, labor, and social matters? What is the quality of life like on and off campus? Is the atmosphere in the department a supportive one for students? Be sure to talk to current students without professors around, in order to get a more accurate “insiders” perspective.
Tip: Beware! Some programs go to great lengths to emphasize strengths and hide weaknesses.

- Programs sometimes include the names of faculty long since departed in the roster. Make sure that the people you want to work with are still there and have no immediate plans to retire or move on.

- Make sure that the faculty you would like to work with have successfully advised other students in recent years. There may be personality or professional issues you do not know about. Ask them about recent students they have worked with and contact those students for feedback.

- A good program should keep statistics. If you ask what the time-to-degree is and they give you the “expected time-to-degree” as opposed to the actual mean or median, they may be trying to hide a poor record. Similarly, beware of a program that does not keep data on its attrition, gender and race components, or percentage of students receiving funding. They may avoid collecting data that is unfavorable. At that point, talk to current students in the program and ask them what they know.

- Do not trust promises that are not in writing, especially about funding. If a school suggests that students are able to get financial support, make sure that students in the program confirm this.

- Some private universities have very expensive programs, but much of the money is funneled away from academic programs. Evaluate a program’s worth in terms of faculty, facilities, and the ultimate value of the degree.
DEGREES AND REQUIREMENTS

The graduate student earns a master’s or doctoral degree by distinguished achievement in advanced study and research. There are various means of evaluating achievement in study: course work, qualifying and comprehensive examinations, various kinds of laboratory, and field work. Achievement in research is mainly evaluated through assessment of the master’s thesis and doctoral degree dissertation.

The Master’s Degree

Thesis or Comprehensive Examination Plan. Depending on what is offered by your major department, students follow either the thesis plan or the comprehensive examination plan. Usually the minimum standards are the same under either plan, but a department may set higher standards and require additional courses and/or examinations to evaluate a student’s capability in his or her field. Consult the Department Student Affairs Officer or Department Graduate Advisor for such requirements.

University Minimum Standards. Each department has the minimum program of study which consists of a number of graduate and upper division courses to be completed while in graduate status. Consult the Department Student Affairs Officer or Department Graduate Advisor for such requirements.

The Master’s Thesis. The thesis is a report on the results of the original investigation. Before the start of the main thesis work, the student obtains approval of the subject and general plan from the thesis committee.

The Master’s Comprehensive Examination. The comprehensive examination is administered by a committee composed of faculty members appointed by the student’s department. Consult the Department Student Affairs Officer or Department Graduate Advisor for information.

The Doctoral Degree

University Minimum Standards. Depending on the department, this may include: program of study (required and recommended), academic residence, departmental written and oral qualifying examinations, required grade point average in all courses taken in graduate status at a university, and/or foreign language requirements. Not all programs have a foreign language requirement (or its equivalent).

Advancement to Candidacy. Students are advanced to candidacy following the completion of course requirements and the written and oral qualifying examinations. Oral qualifying examinations usually entail a dissertation prospectus (research proposal) to be approved by the doctoral committee. The Candidate in Philosophy (C.Phil.) is awarded to qualified students upon advancement to candidacy in Ph.D. programs where it is offered.

Dissertation. As a candidate, a student must demonstrate the ability for independent investigation by completing a dissertation in the principal field of study. The doctoral committee guides progress toward completion of the dissertation.

Defense of the Dissertation. If the defense of the dissertation or final oral examination is required, the doctoral committee must record a decision of “passed” or “not passed.” The Graduate Division of a university has its academic rules in determining how a candidate is or is not considered to have passed the final oral examination.
THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Most programs accept students in the fall only. The earliest deadlines (except medical schools) will be in November. Some programs handle the entire application process themselves and do not involve the university admissions office. Check the catalog for the correct procedure before sending applications.

- Type the application unless you print very neatly. Make sure it contains no misspellings, or typographical or grammatical errors. Report your grade point averages accurately.

- Each school will require at least one official transcript from every college you attended.

- Some schools ask for a full-length paper or example of your work. Do not take this lightly. Model your paper after journal articles in your field as closely as possible. If they ask for a graded assignment, try to work on revising one and having a professor re-grade and comment on it. Do not push the professor to "up" the grade as committees use these papers to check grade inflation as well as the quality of your work. If your professor is unwilling to re-grade and re-comment, revise the paper anyway. Attach the original graded copy to the back. The admissions committee will likely read the better version and appreciate your efforts to improve the paper.

- Send applications as early as possible. Arrange for all other materials (test scores, transcripts, and letters) to be sent equally early. Although applications are accepted up to the deadline, many are read and decided on at the time of arrival of all material. Applying early can help your chances. Late applications are rarely considered.

- If you have contacted professors in the program, keep in touch. Send an e-mail when your application is complete so that they know you are applying. They might read your application or put a word in with the admissions committee. This is specific to academic programs and is not advised for professional school.

- After you have sent off your application, call the schools to make sure that everything is complete.
TIMETABLE FOR APPLYING FOR GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

ASAP Keep a record of your work, research experience, awards, etc. Cultivate relationships with professors who could write letters of recommendation. Open a letter of recommendation file at the Pre-Professional Advising Office. Ask faculty about academic preparation for your field and take appropriate classes. Consider independent study courses (199s), seminars, participating in SRP, or completing an Honors Thesis.

**JUNIOR YEAR**

Spring Talk to others about whether graduate or professional school is for you. Write away for applications and faculty rosters. Begin researching prospective programs and contacting professors/students.

Summer Prepare yourself for standardized tests (except Medical school which is earlier). Begin working on a draft of your personal statement. Revise any additional papers that you may submit with your application. Put aside money to pay for test fees, application fees, campus visits, etc.

**SENIOR YEAR**

Sept. Talk to professors about letters of recommendation. Investigate Extramural funding (fellowships). This is a good time for campus visits although any time fall quarter is fine.

October Complete your personal statement. Take standardized tests. Order official transcripts.

November Pick up application for Federal Student Aid. Start applications. Mail them as soon as possible.

December Finish all applications. Check that your file is complete (e.g. letters and transcripts have arrived). If you have contacted professors in a program, follow up and let them know that you have applied.

February Mail FAFSA.

Spring Receive Notification. Visit campuses. Choose your school. Pick up any recommended reading lists for preparation prior to fall. If you are hoping to work, look for RA-ships and other job opportunities early.

Summer Arrange for housing, work, etc. Read books and articles by professors with whom you will be taking courses. Try to get non-academic chores out of the way (e.g. setting up library privileges, e-mail, gym etc.).

Fall Start program.

**KEEP AN EYE ON DEADLINES!**
MAKING CONTACT WITH FACULTY

A conscientious, deliberate attempt to know and be known by faculty members in your major field of study will most certainly bring greater opportunities for obtaining substantive and specific letters of support for graduate admission when the time comes. Undergraduates who are aware of this early in their baccalaureate career can develop closer contacts soon after entering the University.

There are a number of strategies for pursuing faculty contact open to undergraduate students including:

**Seminars.** These small, focused discussion classes are offered by most departments. They are great opportunities for you to get to know a professor, and for a professor to get to know you, the quality of your work, and the way you think. Both lower and upper division seminars are available.

**Independent Studies.** These courses are typically initiated by students and are based on a topic of interest to both the student and the instructor. Generally, they are numbered 199, though the procedure differs by department. Students gain first-hand experience working in a less structured environment. It is also a chance to demonstrate your energy and initiative. You work one-on-one with a faculty member so that he or she will be likely to remember you.

**Honors Theses.** These are generally long-term independent study courses. Most departments offer departmental honors for the completion of 199ABC. Students involved with College Honors can choose a thesis option. In some departments, participation in the College honors program is not required. In addition to providing students with extended contact with a faculty member, honors theses demonstrate to graduate programs the ability to conduct independent research.

**Student Research Program.** (SRP) This program allows students to become more directly and fully involved in the university research community through opportunities to participate in faculty research projects on a volunteer basis. In addition to faculty contacts, students involved with SRP for one or more quarters receive a notation on their transcripts and may receive units for their work.

**Attend talks.** Many departments have “brown bag lunch” talks or lectures from visitors to the university. These are open to everyone and are actively attended by faculty and graduate students. Undergraduates who attend not only have the chance to meet UCLA faculty one-on-one but also to meet faculty from other universities in the field.

**Office Hours.** All instructors schedule office hours every quarter they teach classes. Students interested in graduate school, independent study, or research opportunities should attend office hours.

In general, any campus activities that bring together undergraduates and faculty members over a period of time will increase the possibility for personal contacts. Whether the activities are social and community-oriented and/or academic in nature, they do provide opportunities for getting to know each other.
Tip: Don't know how to relate to a Professor or TA? Here are some ideas on things to talk about.

1. If you found something you studied in a course particularly interesting, approach the Professor and ask for a bibliography of additional recommended reading. This will help you discover who is doing research in the areas that interest you.

2. Ask your TA or Professor about his or her own research. Better yet, go read articles or books by your professor and come in with your questions.

3. Solicit your professor’s opinions on what he or she thinks an undergraduate should do to prepare for graduate work in the discipline—what would he or she have done differently themselves, what weaknesses do current graduate students bring to the program, etc.

4. Ask about other schools—how their departments differ from UCLA’s department. Is there a different emphasis (e.g. teaching over research, one subject over another)?
APPLICATION ESSAYS

The statement of purpose, sometimes included in the general or autobiographical essay, is an important part of the application. This may be your only opportunity to present yourself to an admissions committee and set yourself apart from other applicants as bright and thoughtful. Many programs look for diversity in their incoming classes; if your background is unique, make that known in your essay. If there are any problematic grades in your transcript or extenuating circumstances to be explained, it is appropriate to do so here. Be sure to proofread what you have written. Submit a neat, clean, typewritten copy. Both what you say and how you say it are important.

Professional school statements of purpose are often more general or personal and vary in style a great deal. The important thing is to create a favorable and memorable impression of you. These schools may be more interested in work and extra-curricular experiences that demonstrate that you have strong potential in the profession as well as academic talent. Graduate schools, particularly Ph.D. programs, are interested primarily in your academic work. Talking about your achievements as fraternity president could hurt you. Focus on your academic goals and research interests, your intellectual development, and why you picked their program.

In order to write a meaningful essay, it is essential that you do your homework. Learn all that you can about the school to which you are applying and the faculty with whom you will be working. You can use this information to help convince your readers that you are appropriately qualified for their program. If someone on the faculty is doing work in an area of interest to you, mention that in your statement. If you are applying to more than one school, you need to write variations of your statement of purpose, tailored to each school. You need to present yourself as a person with goals, direction, and commitment, but also as someone with enough flexibility to adapt to the demands and requirements of a specific school.

Through the personal essay, you have a unique opportunity to:

- Show the committee that you are smart and motivated.
- Convey your long and short range career goals.
- Present yourself as an individual with desirable personal abilities, interests, and plans.
- Describe the nature and significance of your relevant experiences, giving concrete evidence of your knowledge, competence, and motivation in your chosen field.
- Explain your special interest in this particular graduate program.
- Account for any conspicuous weaknesses in your record.
- Demonstrate your writing ability and communication skills in general.

The following topics are usually covered in graduate school essays:

1. Your purpose in applying to graduate school at this particular time. This means you must have thought this through before trying to state your reasons.
2. The area of study in which you want to specialize, and if appropriate, your research interests. This requires that you know the field well enough to make such a selection.
3. Your future use of your graduate study. This will include your short and long range career goals.
4. Your special preparation and ability for study in the field. This is the opportunity to describe your academic background and your extracurricular experience to show what makes you a unique candidate. Describe your accomplishments fully, making the most of your responsibilities and achievements.
5. The strengths and weaknesses that distinguish you from others. This means you must candidly evaluate yourself.
6. Any problem or circumstance that may have affected your grades or entrance exam scores. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation.
Here are some general tips to help you write an effective personal essay:

Before you put pen to paper, make lists of information that may be pertinent to the admissions decision. Lists may include professors, courses, books, research projects, ideas, travel, and other experiences that have been important to you. You should also list work, extracurricular and volunteer activities, special skills, honors and awards.

- Give yourself plenty of time. Start thinking about your essays early. The Admissions Committee reads essays thoroughly and carefully. Make sure you have given it your best effort.

- Be sure to read the essay questions on the application carefully. What information, approach, or emphasis is the question asking for? Make sure you answer all the questions and address all the issues outlined.

- Although you may write a general essay in advance, make certain that each application contains an essay that specifically answers the questions asked by the school.

- Your spirit, character and uniqueness should come through, but your writing should be formal and correct. Refer to Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style*, Ross-Larsen's *Edit Yourself*, or other writing manuals. Take your essay to an English tutor in Sunset Commons for help with grammar.

- Include at least a sentence or two that tells why you have chosen that particular institution.

- Strive for a strong opening line or paragraph. Look for something beyond the predictable, something that demonstrates the qualities that set you apart from other candidates. Do not be too “cute”.

- Specific knowledge, skills, and insights acquired through internships and other work experiences, paid or volunteer, and related to your proposed field of study, are particularly strong material.

- Any experience that demonstrates interpersonal talents, entrepreneurial skills, ability to perform under stress, unusual background, or a genuine level of commitment to some worthy cause could be appropriate if you demonstrate the relevance.

- Ask someone whose writing skills you trust to critique your statement.

- Avoid clichés. Run the spell check. Do multiple drafts.

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**Tip:** Need Help With Your Statement of Purpose?

1. Consult books for advice. Two useful guides: Richard J. Stelzer’s *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate or Professional School* and Boycon Curry’s *Essays that Worked for Law Schools: 35 Essays from Successful Applications to the Nation’s Top Law Schools*.

2. Get help in the writing tutorial at Covel Commons.

3. Find a friendly Professor (does not have to be in your field) to take a look. Or find a TA or a friend.
Most graduate and professional schools or fellowships require applicants to submit three letters of recommendation attesting to the ability of the applicant to succeed in future studies. The letters are typically used to augment, validate or explain the information provided in your formal application, statement of purpose and/or essay. For some applicants, the information provided in these letters will mean the difference between acceptance and rejection.

Unfortunately, it is all too common in a large university like UCLA for students to complete their undergraduate study without becoming personally acquainted with any of their professors. Then, as applicants for graduate study, such students are often reluctant to approach even the friendliest of professors, not wanting to impose upon their time. To make matters worse, in an effort not to appear bothersome, students sometimes merely leave forms or addresses for professors who are willing to write letters, thereby submitting themselves to whatever characterization the writer can vaguely recall. When the critical decisions are made in the selection of applicants, a general or uncertain recommendation can be more damaging than helpful.

Whether or not you are such a student, the following suggestions can be of benefit in determining your strategy and tactics for obtaining the best possible letters of recommendation.

The References:

The type of program you select, academic or professional, is an important factor in determining whom you ask to be a reference. Admissions commissions for academic Ph.D. programs tend to place the greatest weight on letters from faculty who are nationally recognized scholars in their field. They expect these persons to write knowledgeably about the quality of your past academic work, your potential for future scholarly productivity, and such personal characteristics as persistence, thoroughness, and general intelligence. Letters from TA’s, student affairs professionals, and employers tend to carry little weight with academic admissions committees because these persons are not expected to have direct knowledge of the requirements of a particular discipline or your potential for success in that discipline. Untenured faculty should also be considered somewhat riskier than tenured faculty.

Professional schools also find letters of recommendation form academic faculty useful for gaining insight about your ability to do graduate level work. A letter from a prominent professor who knows you well will have a strong impact. However, since many professional schools have no particular preference for a specific undergraduate major, letters from less well-known faculty and instructors (including TA’s) who can demonstrate a personal knowledge of your abilities are also important. In addition, letters from employers and other non-academic professionals who can attest to your experience and achievements in areas directly related to your chosen profession are weighted heavily. Your references for professional schools may include letters from faculty, employers, and others who know of your related experiences.

If you know a TA or lab instructor well, inquire about the possibility of the professor writing a letter based on the TA’s impressions or signing one written by the TA. It is also not uncommon for references to ask applicants to write their own letters. If this should occur, do not be modest. Present a flattering picture of yourself. Point out strengths, providing specific illustrations or substantiating evidence. Write a rough draft and have it approved before you fill out the actual forms or type of letters.

In general, it is far better to have a strong letter of recommendation, obviously based on personal knowledge, from a lower level faculty member than a weak, generalized, impersonal one from an outstanding professor.

The Content of the Letters:

Letters of recommendation should be specifically directed toward your application for admission to graduate school. They should focus upon those areas that directly pertain to your potential as a graduate student and a prospective professional person. General character letters are of limited or no value to admissions committees.
Specific topical areas that can be supported by examples from your past performance provide the most useful information. Graduate admissions committees expect letters of recommendation to include the following:

1. Assurance of the applicants ability to do high level graduate work.
2. Relatedness of the applicants experience to his or her chosen area of graduate study.
3. Evidence of applicant’s acquisition of any special skills required in the chosen area of study.
4. The applicant’s potential to make a significant contribution to the profession and/or to the body of knowledge in the discipline.

Although you cannot control the actual content of the letter of recommendation, you can provide your references with information that will help them write informative letters. The next section discusses the information you should provide and offers suggestions for requesting letters from references.

**Requesting a Letter of Recommendation:**

What is described above is the ideal situation, i.e., preparing well before the need for a reference occurs. For many students, the ideal does not necessarily match reality. Therefore, we turn to a consideration of the options that are open to prospective graduate students in their senior year. These suggestions should be followed by all students, but they are particularly important for those of you who are approaching a reference for the first time. The request for a letter of recommendation should be made in person whenever possible. It is important for your reference to be able to attach a face to your name. Furthermore, be as gracious as possible in making this request. Try not to ask for a letter to be written when the deadline for submitting is very close. There should be at least a month’s time between your request and the date the letter is due for review by the graduate school. Proper protocol is to provide a stamped addressed envelope and appropriate reference forms for each school to which you are applying. Never press a prospective reference to submit a letter when the writer seems hesitant to fulfill your request--the letter might do more harm than good.

Whether or not you personally know the person from whom you are requesting a recommendation, you will need to supply specific information concerning your goals and your perception of what you did and how you performed during the period of academic and/or social contact. You are responsible for providing reference writers with the information that will enable them to write meaningful recommendations for you. Some persons will readily agree to write a letter of recommendation for you. However, everyone has the right to refuse regardless of the completeness of the information you furnish.

**Sending Letters of Recommendation:**

The Career Center maintains Letter of Recommendation Files for UCLA undergraduates applying to graduate and professional school. Recommenders need only write one letter of recommendation. For a small fee, the Career Center will duplicate and mail out your file to all of the programs you request. The Career Center suggests you open a file early in your career at UCLA. This will allow you to ask professors for recommendations immediately following a class or research experience. Updating an old letter is easier for most professors than trying to remember old impressions of you. The Career Center is located at 501 Westwood Plaza, on the corner of Westwood and Strathmore.
LETTER OF REFERENCE/RECOMMENDATION GUIDE

Applicant’s Name: ____________________________________________________

Date letter request made: __________________   Date letter is DUE __________

Letter of Reference is for: ____________________________________________

In general, a useful letter of recommendation will involve the following:

- Positive statements about the candidate. This may include comments about candidate’s academic potential, motivation, enthusiasm, work habits, class participation, lab work, research, interaction in office hours, etc.

- Concrete details. Good letters provide examples and substantiating evidence. “Glowing language” without specific reference to your instructor’s knowledge of you, your work, and your goals is less helpful.

- Discussion of an applicant’s academic record and how it reflects or fails to reflect his or her strengths can be helpful to admissions committees. Specific issues that might be addressed include: grades and course difficulty; test scores and how they reflect an applicant’s aptitude; withdrawal from quarter, or other irregularities; study abroad or at another institution; or the applicant’s academic projects and/or research experience.

- Discussion of the applicant’s weaknesses can be appropriate but increasingly is read by committees as a “red flag.” If your reference has reservations, it is helpful to express a belief that they may be overcome. Overtly negative assessments of the applicant and/or comments irrelevant to their application (e.g. physical appearance, race/ethnicity, private issues) are not helpful and should not be included in a reference letter.

- Careful proofreading is important, especially for the applicant’s NAME and GENDER and the SCHOOL and PROGRAM to which he or she is applying.

If your reference feels that he or she cannot write a positive letter of recommendation, you should select another reference.
Information provided by applicant for use by reference.

Period of time and manner in which applicant and reference have been acquainted.

a.) Course titles
b.) Year and quarter
c.) Grades
d.) Experiential programs
e.) Research/academic projects

Noteworthy details.

a.) Term papers (Give title or topic)
b.) Research Papers
c.) Extended discussions, correspondence
d.) Group meetings: formal or informal?
e.) Special projects
f.) Other

Qualities. The following are criteria that the reference writer might consider.

a.) Originality and creativity
b.) Scientific background
c.) Ability to work well with others
d.) Research ability
e.) Familiarity with research literature
f.) Motivation and Perseverance.
g.) Autonomy
h.) Language skills and ability to communicate
i.) Organization/Administrative skills
j.) Other characteristics relevant to field

Academic Record. Grades, overall GPA, applicant’s GPA in the specific academic major, comments, explanations, indications of improvement, strong and weak areas, test scores, irregularities, etc.

Honors/Awards.

Other professors or staff members who have known applicant.

Other information or comments for use by reference writer.

A COPY OF Applicant’s PERSONAL STATEMENT (attached).
Nearly every graduate and professional program will require or recommend that you send scores from some standardized entrance examination. The weight assigned to the examination results varies from program to program. Sometimes in graduate programs, they are unimportant for admission but become important for funding. In general, while good examination scores can contribute to your getting into graduate school, they are only one of several factors the admissions committee will consider.

The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is commonly required by academic departments. Scores on the GRE Aptitude Test, the Advanced Test, or both may be used by admissions or fellowship panels to supplement your undergraduate records and other indicators of your potential for graduate study.

The GRE Aptitude Test contains sections designed to measure verbal, quantitative, and analytical ability. The Advanced Tests, or Subject Tests, are designed to measure knowledge and understanding of a subject matter basic to graduate study in specific fields (e.g. Biology, French, and English Literature). Before you take a Subject Test, be sure the graduate programs you are applying for require it. For more specific information obtain the current GRE Information Bulletin published by ETS.

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is designed to measure certain abilities important in the study of Law and aids law schools in assessing the academic promise of their applicants. The test is intended to give no advantage to candidates from a particular academic background. The questions yielding the LSAT score are designed to measure the ability to read, write, understand, and reason. It will include a writing sample or exercise that will not be scored, but a copy of this will be sent to each school. For additional details see the information booklet prepared by the Law School Admissions Service.

The Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) measures general verbal and mathematical abilities that are associated with success in the first year of study at graduate schools of business. The verbal sections include reading comprehension, writing ability, and practical judgment (data evaluation and data application) questions. The quantitative sections test basic mathematical skills, as well as the ability to reason qualitatively, to solve qualitative problems, and to interpret data given in graphs, charts, or tables. ETS publishes a GMAT Bulletin that gives more specific details about the test.

Other entrance exams required for specific degree programs include Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Dental Admission Test (DAT), and National Teacher Examination (NTE). The admissions office of the graduate school to which you are applying can usually provide information about entrance exams.

Applications for entrance examinations can be found on campus in the following locations.

The Career Center – 501 Westwood Plaza
GRE: Graduate Admissions Office – 1247 Murphy Hall
LSAT: Law School Admissions Office – 71 Dodd Hall
GMAT: MBA Program Office – B201 Gold Hall in the Anderson School
CBEST Applications: Education School Admissions – 1009 Moore Hall

The UCLA Alumni Association sometimes sponsors a practice examination session in conjunction with a Test Prep company. Check with them around February. This is a chance to sit down and take the examination in an authentic exam setting before you do the real thing! Best of all: it’s free!

**Tip: To Take a Prep Course or Not To Take A Prep Course**

Increasingly, students are taking preparation courses for entrance examinations. If exam scores are an important part of admission, you may want to consider doing this. There is a gender gap on the exam scores: statistically more men take the preparation courses and get better scores. Women are especially encouraged to consider a preparation course. Yes, they are expensive. Yes, they are of very little relevance to anything you want to study. Yes, they are obnoxious. But take the course.
FINANCIAL AID

Types of graduate student support include:

1. Grants or scholarships are direct cash awards and require no service in return.

2. Fellowships may require work in exchange for the award. Each fellowship needs to be examined individually.

3. Assistantships, traineeships, and internships provide financial help in exchange for the performance of services. These may include teaching, research, reading and grading papers, or campus or community service. These activities offer an opportunity to acquire experience.

4. Loans may be obtained through student loan programs. Money may be provided by banks, savings and loan associations, and credit unions.

5. Work-study funds are sometimes available to graduate students and are based on financial need. Under work-study, a large portion of your salary (in an on-campus or approved off-campus job) would be paid by a government agency or special university fund.

Of course you should not limit your thinking to any one of these types of assistance. Because financial aid is becoming much scarcer, apply for whatever you can. The majority of graduate students receive their support directly from their graduate institutions. The fact or amount of support varies from one institution and department to another. Some schools prefer to support students after their first year. In that case, try to make it through the first year, do well, and apply for an award for the following year.

There are many national awards for which you may apply. Some are available to students in particular disciplines or who are traditionally under-represented in graduate schools. The application deadlines are very early. Most are EXTREMELY competitive and prestigious; you would take these awards with you to the institution of your choice.

Visit the Scholarship Resource Office (See Resources) to find books and computer databases of scholarships available for graduate and professional school. They offer advice, workshops and a very extensive library.

Increasingly, universities take financial need into consideration when awarding aid. You may qualify. Graduate and professional students are, by definition, independent. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is available in the Financial Aid Office (A219 Murphy Hall) in November.

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Tip: If you are applying to a program (usually Ph.D.) that offers “funding” (e.g. fellowships or teaching assistantships), remember that your goal is not simply to get in but to get funded.

1. Find out which professors in the department to which you are applying have funding resources (either grant money or departmental clout) and make contacts with them. This could be the difference between funding or not in your first or second year.

2. Make it clear in your application and to any professors you contact that you are seeking funding and that it will be an important consideration for you as you select a school.

3. If you visit, dress nicely but not lavishly—remember, you want them to know you need money.

4. Apply to some schools where you think you might have a better chance of a funding package, even if they are not your top choices.

5. If you get into a school without funding, immediately contact them and see if there is any possibility of changing their funding decision. Some schools “negotiate” based on your other offers. Some schools “match” department funding with outside sources if you have secured an outside scholarship.

6. Get solid, honest information about funding prospects after the first year. Do not be lured in by a one-year fellowship or the promise of future funding unless graduate students confirm that the department has adequate resources for this to be reality.
RESOURCES

**Counseling Assistants**  
A-316 Murphy Hall, http://www.college.ucla.edu/up/counseling/  
These are graduate and professional students trained to help undergraduates with planning and applying.

**Teaching Assistants and Faculty**  
They are perhaps your most important resource--talk to them!

**The Career Center**  
Meet with a counselor to talk about career plans and/or the application process to professional schools (medical school, law school, etc.). Use their extensive library and attend workshops. This office also has a letter-of-recommendation service that is highly recommended.

**Departmental Counseling Offices**  
See listing of offices and phone numbers in the Schedule of Classes.  
Departmental counselors can advise you on the discipline and any available departmental resources.

**Directories/Books/Catalogs**

*Peterson’s Annual Guides to Graduate Study* profile over 1400 accredited institutions offering masters and/or doctoral programs. Included in many profiles is a listing of faculty and their research interests. *The Guide to American Graduate Schools* and *The Directory of Graduate Programs* are also useful. *US News and World Report* publishes an annual graduate school issue.

Several recommended titles: Emily Toth’s *Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*, Robert E. Clark’s *The Real Guide to Graduate School: What You Better Know Before You Choose Humanities and Social Sciences*, Patricia McWade’s *Financing Graduate School: How To Get the Money for Your Master’s or Ph.D.*, and *Careers in Science and Engineering: A Student Planning Guide to Graduate School and Beyond*.

The Microfiche College Catalog Collection in College Library has most US and foreign university catalogs.

**Information Fairs/Forums**

An annual Graduate and Professional School Information Day is held on the UCLA campus, usually in late October or early November. Check with Graduate Affirmative Affairs, 1249 Murphy Hall.

There are other events in Southern California where you will be able to meet with graduate school recruiters from across the country include the GRE Forum, Law Forum, and MBA Forum. Information on dates and locations is available at the Career Center.

**Scholarship Resource Center**  
233 Covel Commons, (310) 206-2875, http://www.college.ucla.edu/up/src/  
You can use this office to research fellowships that you might be able to take with you to the graduate program you attend.

**Student Clubs**

A number of undergraduate societies (e.g., Pre-Law Society, Undergraduate Business Society) provide workshops, guest speakers, and other resources to undergraduates who are interested in graduate or professional school. These groups are often affiliated with departments, listed in the catalog, or advertised in the *Daily Bruin*.

**World Wide Web** (start at UCLA’s homepage http://www.ucla.edu or use a search engine)

Most UCLA campus resources are on-line. Most other universities have information on-line as well. You can visit Departmental, Professor and Graduate Student Web Pages, and Professor and Graduate student Web Pages and obtain catalogs, application materials, deadlines, faculty rosters, and e-mail addresses via the web.
THINGS TO DO

Evaluating Decision to Attend Graduate School

1. ________________________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________________________
4. ________________________________________________________________________________
5. ________________________________________________________________________________

Preparing for Graduate School

1. ________________________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________________________
4. ________________________________________________________________________________
5. ________________________________________________________________________________

Applying to Graduate School

1. ________________________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________________________
4. ________________________________________________________________________________
5. ________________________________________________________________________________