

# Applying to Graduate School: Frequently Asked Questions

## How do you choose a graduate program?

When selecting a graduate program, most students consider the location, the cost and the types of programs offered at each university. What most students do not consider is that the expectations of the university, the department, and potential advisors may drastically differ between programs. When comparing graduate programs, you should consider the fields of research expertise, the teaching goals of the professors, and what expectations the department has for their graduates. Ask questions like, "Does this program emphasize theory or practice?", "Do most graduates go into academia or industry?", and "Are there specializations within this program or is this a general degree?" Other factors to consider include the availability of teaching opportunities, the reputation of the program and the university, the job placement rate of graduates, class offerings and curriculum requirements.

## How do you find the right program for you?

It is wise to make sure you are applying to the right program, as this choice will determine your research focus and future career opportunities. When selecting a program, the first thing you want to do is choose an area of research. Keep in mind that it is not unusual to go into a graduate program different from your undergraduate major. Identify the general area of research you would like to pursue. It should probably be more specific than just food science or nutrition. For example, decide if you want to work in chemistry, microbiology, processing, sensory, flavors, proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, etc. Ask other faculty and graduate students how they chose their area of research.

The next thing to do is to select institutions that you would consider applying to based on their strength in the area of research you are interested in and the overall reputation of the program. Apply to more than one school. Consider applying to universities that seem almost impossible to be accepted into, some universities that are "sure bets", and others that are in-between – that way your options will be best laid out. Certain programs may be tougher to be accepted to and not as attainable while other universities that you might feel are "long shots" may gladly accept you. It may be helpful to ask faculty or graduate students which schools they think have the best food science and nutrition programs. Then, go to the website for each school and the department homepage to find out what each school and each department has to offer you. Other good resources are the following websites:

GradSchools.com <<http://www.gradschools.com/>>,

Petersons<<http://www.petersons.com>>

PhDs.org <<http://www.phds.org>>

American Society for Nutrition<<http://www.asns.org/graddir/gradframe.html>>

[Institute of Food Technologists](#)

Keep in mind that some of the best programs are not always at the biggest schools, so keep your options open!

## **What are the different parts of the graduate school application?**

Most schools require several different items for an application to be considered complete. A typical application consists of the school's application form, a copy of transcripts from all colleges you have attended, your GRE scores, a personal statement, and three letters of recommendation.

## **Where do you get the application?**

Most applications are now online. To find the application, go to the website for the university you are applying to and search for the graduate college. In general, there is a link to the application form from the graduate college website. Also, keep in mind that you do not have to fill out the entire application in one sitting. It can be started and finished at different times, just remember that the application has to be submitted before the deadline and that all other paperwork such as your transcripts and letters of recommendation have to have reached the school by the deadline and know when that deadline is! Applications are usually due in mid-January to early-February to enter a program that begins in the fall, particularly if you want to be considered for a fellowship or assistantship. Many professors may accept students after the deadline, but these are only on an as-needed basis with each professor.

## **Are grades really that important?**

Yes! Grades are an important indicator of a long-term performance. Most graduate schools have a 3.0 GPA for the last 60 hours of undergraduate coursework as their cut-off for admission. Typically, this is your junior and senior years. If your GPA is below 3.0, there may be some avenues around it (see below).

## **Is the GRE really that important?**

Yes! Your GRE score is another key component that graduate programs use to evaluate your potential for graduate study. A high score on the GRE can balance a low GPA. Absolutely make sure you study for the GRE. Many GRE study and preparation guides are available at any bookstore. Go through the tutorials provided for you when you register for the GRE. You may also wish to consider taking a formal course on the GRE (e.g., Kaplan), but beware that these can be costly. Most importantly, practice, practice, practice! Take practice exams under the actual conditions of the exam so that you will know what to expect and will not be surprised come exam day.

## **When should I take the GRE?**

Generally, the GRE is taken in the summer or fall of the year before entering a graduate program. If you can, take the GRE in September or earlier so that, if you do not do well, you can try again. There is another reason to take the test early: to be sure that your scores are available by the admission deadline. Incomplete applications are not usually considered, and when they are, the fact that they are incomplete reflects poorly on the candidate. If you can, take the GRE no later than October. If you take the test in December, you could be cutting it close. If you have to take a December test, *follow up*

*with the graduate schools right before their deadline and make sure they have received the scores.*

### **How to I sign-up for the GRE?**

The GRE General Test is given year-round, for a \$115 fee. Register online, by mail, or by calling the UIUC test center in the Turner Student Services Building at 244-1342. You may take the General Test only once per calendar month and no more than five times within any twelve-month period. This applies even if you cancelled your scores on a test taken previously. The test is usually given Monday-Saturday, and you can sign-up for the morning or afternoon test session. When you register for the General Test, a CD-ROM containing GRE POWERPREP Software will be sent to you. It includes test tutorials, practice questions with explanations, two actual computer-adaptive tests for the verbal and quantitative sections, sample topics and essays for the analytical writing section, and advice on how to write effective essays for the Issue and Argument tasks.

### **How to report your scores from the GRE?**

At the end of the test, you can choose either to view your unofficial verbal and quantitative scores on-screen immediately or cancel them before viewing them (You will not be able to view your analytical writing scores). If you cancel your scores, they cannot be reinstated, and no refund will be issued. The official verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing scores will be sent to you and the institutions you designate within ten to fifteen days after the test. When you take the GRE, you will be able to select 5 universities to have your scores automatically sent to, for no additional fee. If you need to have your scores sent to more than 5 schools, you can request additional score reports online, by mailing in the request form, or phoning the GRE organization. An additional fee will be charged for each additional score report.

### **Where do you get your official transcripts?**

Your transcripts are not included in the application that you send to the graduate program. Instead, transcripts are sent by the UIUC registrar's office. To order your transcripts, visit <http://www.oar.uiuc.edu/current/trans1.html> Be aware that your student account will be charged \$5.00 for each transcript you request. Be certain that you know where the transcript should be sent - directly to the graduate program you are applying to, the graduate college, or both. This information should be included in the online application. Remember to begin this process early because schools require time to process your forms and send the transcripts. You don't want your application to be rejected because your transcripts were late or never arrived.

### **Who should write your letters of recommendation?**

Letters of recommendation are extremely important. These recommendations should come primarily from faculty but some may also come from job supervisors. Professors with whom you have had considerable contact, especially in non-classroom settings, such as research labs, will provide the most effective letters of recommendation. Faculty members who have advised you in your role as an officer in any clubs or organizations are also very good sources for letters of recommendation.

Most schools require three letters of recommendation, and you can send more than three! It is best to have someone from different activities you are involved in write recommendations. For example, have someone from AFT write a letter, a professor that you are particularly well acquainted with write another letter, and maybe your research adviser write the last letter.

When you have decided which programs to apply to, give each faculty member your CV or resume and your personal statement describing your goals and interests. This will allow them to write a more detailed and personal letter. When you ask a professor to write a recommendation, be sure to give him/her all necessary documentation; universities have their own recommendation forms. Let the faculty member know whether the letter should be returned to you to be included with your other application materials or whether it should be sent directly to the school. If so, provide a stamped, addressed envelope for that purpose. Also, if you are applying to more than one university, be sure to give that person the forms for every university at the same time. This will save on confusion for both you and the person writing the letter.

The biggest advice concerning letters of recommendation is to seek them out early! When you ask a professor for a recommendation, make sure that they have at least a few weeks to write the letter and give them a deadline for submission of the letter! If your application is due by January 15, request that your recommendation be sent by December 15 so that the school may have adequate time to process it, and always follow up to be sure the letter has arrived by contacting the universities you are applying to. Also, it is a good idea to remind the recommenders by email just before the expected deadline; if the letters have not arrived by near the due date, contact the individuals writing your letters with a polite letter, e-mail, phone call, or personal visit. Respectfully request that they send the letter ASAP. It should be noted that some universities require recommendation letters be submitted online.

### **What do you say in the personal statement?**

The personal statement is your opportunity to speak up for yourself. Be creative and informative as you introduce yourself and explain why you want to attend graduate school and why the program you are applying to is a perfect match to your skills. Think about how to weave any relevant skills, background and accomplishments into the reason the specific program attracts and motivates you. Focus on how your educational, research and work experiences led you to this program. Describe how this program will benefit you, where you see yourself in the program and how it fits into your future goals. Some universities provide specific questions to be answered in the personal statement. Most importantly, be specific and concise. The personal statement should be around a page in length and definitely not more than two pages. Be sure to check for any errors in spelling and grammar. Also, have someone else review your personal statement before sending in a final draft. Professors are good reviewers because they have seen many personal statements and have a much clearer idea of what is expected from one.

### **What happens after you submit the application?**

In general, after the program has reviewed your application they may invite you to visit the school to have interviews with potential advisors. This may occur by a couple of different methods. Some programs have formal recruiting weekends in which a large number of applicants are brought to campus for 1 to 2 days to interview with faculty and meet current graduate students and other applicants to the program. Other schools have a less formal program. In this scenario, the graduate program coordinator will typically contact you to schedule an interview. They will arrange for you to meet with 4-5 interested professors to discuss working in their lab as well as arranging for you to meet with current graduate students and tour the facilities and the school. It is up to you to then decide which of the professors and lab groups you would like to join.

Lastly, individual professors may contact you personally to invite you to interview with them specifically. In this case, they will usually give you a tour of their labs, allow you to meet with their current students and ask them questions. However, you typically do not get to meet other faculty at these visits unless you arrange to do so separately.

Typically, all or part of your travel expenses will be reimbursed for the visit. If you are invited to visit a campus, you should go. These campus visits are key in determining if the program is a good fit for you.

### **What if no one contacts you to interview?**

If you have not been contacted by anyone at the program you would like to join, this does NOT mean you won't be accepted. In this case, you must be more proactive about expressing your interest and securing an advisor. Most schools will not accept you to a program unless an advisor has agreed to admit you into his/her lab. If you are interested, then contact the graduate program coordinator to discuss setting up a time that you could meet with faculty. You may also consider directly contacting a professor that you want to work with and express your interest to them. (Please note that some programs discourage students from contacting faculty during the application process. Please review the specific practices for each program.) Write a personal letter or e-mail to each faculty member you are interested in working with. In the e-mail, you should say briefly who you are, why you want to work with that person, and your background and experience. Ask specifically whether the prospective faculty advisor will be taking on any students in the next academic year. Include a CV or resume at the end of the e-mail or appended to the letter. Most professors will be more willing to accept you if you show the initiative to contact them.

### **How do you choose a graduate advisor?**

Generally, you should choose an advisor that you will feel comfortable working with, and remember that the reputation of your work will be a reflection of your advisor. You should consider the research discipline of your advisor and be sure that this is something that you want to pursue, because your future job prospects may be limited by your choice of specialty. You are encouraged to meet with as many faculty members within the chosen specialty as possible. When meeting with the faculty, be sure to ask about the advisor's work ethic, what kind of work will you be asked to do outside of your own research, their policy on taking vacation days, their expectations for you in terms of course load and requirements, the availability of attending industry conferences, any

expectations for publishing papers, how long it takes most students to earn their degrees, etc. You must always feel that you can have an open relationship with your advisor and don't be afraid to contact them at any time for any questions you may have. You may wish to also consult with the advisor's current students for more first-hand knowledge of working in that lab group and don't be afraid to ask the advisor for their contact information.

### **How do I apply for fellowships or be considered for financial support?**

For most schools and programs, when you apply to the program, you are automatically considered for any fellowships and assistance that may be available. There is no need to apply separately. The program coordinator will usually let you know if you will receive any sort of fellowship with your letter of acceptance to the program. These fellowships are typically multi-year, which is why it is important to submit your application early so that you may be considered for these awards. Additionally, you may receive financial support in the form of research assistantships. This is dependent on your chosen advisor and his/her available funds. Most research assistantships include tuition waivers as well as a monthly stipend. This something you definitely want to consider when selecting your advisor. You may also receive financial aid as part of a teaching assistantship. This assistantship requires you to serve as a TA for a course, usually in the department you are in. Often, your chosen advisor may offer you a teaching assistantship for the classes he or she teaches. Additionally, you may seek out teaching opportunities in your department by contacting other faculty or asking the graduate program coordinator for available opportunities. Most teaching assistantships offer a monthly stipend and a tuition waiver. Many organizations and outside sources also offer one-time monetary fellowships that you may consider applying to. Your department or advisor can give you a list of fellowships that students have applied to in the past. The graduate college for your school may also keep a list of available fellowships on their website.

### **How do you accept an offer?**

Once you have decided that a program is right for you, call them to accept their offer and send them a written acceptance. You should contact the graduate program coordinator, if there is one, as well as your chosen advisor. Typically, your acceptance letter will tell you the appropriate steps to accept an offer. Do not accept an early offer as a "back-up" in case your preferred school declines your application; your acceptance means another student will be rejected or placed on a waiting list.

### **How to decline another offer?**

Once you have crossed a school off your list - or have accepted an offer from another school - immediately contact the other schools or faculty you are applying to and let them know you plan to go elsewhere, both directly and in writing. Do not forget this simple courtesy; there are students on their waiting lists that will appreciate your timely decisions in these matters.

### **Timetable for applying to Graduate School:**

### Summer/September

- Take the necessary standardized tests for admissions (GRE and any required subject tests)
- Research schools and graduate programs and narrow your choices that you want to apply to
- Consider whom to ask for letters of recommendation

### September/October

- Carefully examine each of your program choices' applications. Make special note of any questions or essay topics that will require extra attention.
- Write a rough draft of your personal statement
- Ask a faculty member or career/graduate admissions counselor to review your personal statement
- Ask faculty for letters of recommendation. Be sure to provide them with a copy of each program's recommendation form, your resume, and your personal statement

### November/December

- Finalize your personal statement and any additional essays
- Apply for outside fellowships or other sources of financial aid, if applicable.
- Check and record the due date for each application

### December/January

- Complete the application forms for each school
- Mail your applications
- Follow-up to be sure letters of recommendation and transcripts reached each school

### February/March/April

- Interview with interested faculty
- Visit the schools where you've been accepted
- Notify the program of your acceptance
- Notify the programs that you're declining
- Typically, April 15 is the deadline for accepting an offer of admission and financial support.