

## CAREER GUIDE



# GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL



SAINT VINCENT  
COLLEGE

CAREER AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER

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# Graduate and Professional School... Getting Started

*Decide if Graduate or Professional School is Right FOR YOU*

## Graduate School Options

### Reasons to pursue an advanced degree:

- Your career goals require an advanced degree.
- You want to become an expert in a specific field or industry.
- A graduate degree may allow you to advance in your career.
- A graduate degree may allow you to focus on a career change.
- A graduate degree is necessary for your desired professional field.
- You are still motivated and in the studying mode.
- You want to enter your profession as soon as possible.
- You do not have any financial obligations right now that would detract from financing graduate school.

### Reasons NOT to pursue an advanced degree:

- You are avoiding the job market for fear of not finding a job.
- You plan to use graduate school to explore a career field.
- You are not sure which career options are relevant to your major.
- You enjoy the intellectual stimulation and the lifestyle of being a student.
- Someone else expects you to go to graduate school; it is not your choice.
- You don't know what else to do with your future.

Do not attend graduate or professional school solely for financial gain. Consider the intangible factors associated with a graduate degree, such as knowledge that cannot be obtained through on-the-job training and intellectual stimulation.

## Advanced Degree, Employment or BOTH?

### Benefits of obtaining an advanced degree:

- Your career and academic goals are well-defined.
- You have the drive and enthusiasm to continue your higher education.
- You have the financial means in terms of loans, savings, grants, fellowships and assistantships.

### Benefits of obtaining employment:

- You need time to clarify your career goals and select an area of study.
- You feel drained academically and need time to recharge your academic batteries.
- For some fields, practical experience may allow you to have greater success as a graduate student.

### Benefits of obtaining an advanced degree while working:

- Many employers offer tuition reimbursement for graduate and professional school.
- Taking courses preserves and maintains academic study skills.
- You are able to maintain a salary while gaining experience in the classroom.
- Working while pursuing an advanced degree can create networking opportunities that could lead to a job after graduation.
- Pursuing an advanced degree concurrently while working enriches both educational and work experience by applying classroom knowledge on the job.

*Some employers offer tuition reimbursement as a benefit that will pay partial or full tuition for qualified employees while they maintain their professional position within the company.*

# Selecting a Field of Study

**DID YOU** know that it is possible to obtain your doctoral degree directly after graduation, without obtaining a master's degree first? Many students do not, but depending on your field, it could be a viable option that saves you time, money or both.

## Doctoral vs. Master's Degree

*Peterson's*, the guide to undergraduate and graduate institutions, notes that every program and every institution is different. Some require all students to begin as master-level candidates. Others will offer master-level status to some entering students, but doctoral status to others. Obtaining doctoral status is usually contingent upon academic and career objectives. When you attend a combined program, you complete master-level work as part of your doctoral requirements.

### Benefits of obtaining a doctoral degree:

- Doctoral candidates often receive more funding (research and teaching internships), although the positions can be more competitive.
- Pursuing each degree separately can take longer.
- You have to go through the application process only once.
- You are completely dedicated to your area of study.
- You want to work in a highly competitive field, and a doctorate is required.
- You plan to teach or research at the university level or study in a research-intensive field.

### Obtaining a master's degree first may be the right choice if:

- Your college grades are not strong enough to get you into a doctoral program.
- You need only a master's degree to qualify for the job of interest.
- You are continuing your education as a means of changing careers.
- You may not be entirely sure a doctorate is the best choice for you.

Regardless of which path you choose, it is essential to research your options carefully. Obtaining a doctorate is an exciting step, but it is also a great commitment!

## Assessing Your Goals

**ONCE YOU** have determined that you want to attend graduate or professional school there are a number of factors to consider. Certainly, the location and setting is important. Do you want to go to school in a major city or a more rural location? The size of the institution is also a factor. With the location comes the cost-of-living factor, especially if you determine that you do not want to live in university housing. Location, size, cost and reputation should all be taken into consideration when making a final decision about graduate school.

The reputation of the institution is also a factor to think about. Is the most prestigious school that, for instance, has the highest *U.S. News and World Report* rankings the best fit for you? With prestige comes a certain culture with expectations that may not fit your personality and goals. In certain disciplines, the prestige of the school may have an impact on your first job and your starting salary.

Of course, a major determining factor is cost and the availability of financial aid. What financial aid opportunities such as scholarships, research assistantships or fellowships are available at the school?

Another factor associated with reputation is where students are finding employment after graduation. Does the program have a national reputation, or is it more specialized to a particular region? What are the average salaries of graduates, and which industries and employers are hiring them? Are the graduates getting positions related to their field of study?

The size of the program and university are also issues to consider. Making the transition from a small, private, religiously affiliated college, like Saint Vincent College, to a large public university can be daunting. Both the size of the institution and the culture of the university can be quite different.

# Graduate or Professional School Timeline

## With a Career Consultant or Your Academic Adviser

### FIRST YEAR

- Remember to do a First-Year Check-in with your career consultant to discuss any other interests or concerns you may have regarding your future as a graduate student.

### SOPHOMORE & JUNIOR YEARS

- If your plans for graduate or professional school are not yet defined, you may want to investigate the course requirements for entry into a program. For instance, if you are in a non-business major, but are considering pursuing an MBA a few years after graduation, you may want to take the necessary courses to meet the minimum entrance requirements.
- Attend Career and Professional Development Center events on graduate and professional school topics.
- Speak to your academic adviser about GPA expectations and other academic credentials for programs of interest in your career field.

### SENIOR YEAR

- Meet with your career consultant to have your essay reviewed and go over any last-minute questions regarding the application process.

## On Your Own

- If you know that graduate school may be an option for you, take advantage of networking with upperclassmen to learn more about opportunities and schools that may be a good fit for you.
- Establish a rapport with three or four professors to build relationships for future recommendations.

- Research schools via their website for the particular field of study. Narrow your selection to two or three reach institutions, competitive schools and safe schools.
- Determine the degree you wish to pursue.
- Organize a binder or spreadsheet to track your research, necessary credentials for admission, deadlines and applications.
- Investigate national and local scholarships, fellowships and assistantships. Pay close attention to application deadlines.
- Take free online practice exams.
- Consider taking a test preparation course or purchasing a test prep book if your practice results do not meet requirements.
- Define your goals. Your graduate or professional school is for defining your interests in what you want to do.
- Find out which admission exams are required and take required exams.
- Determine application deadlines and admission procedures.
- Visit institutions of interest and consider whether you have the credentials to be a competitive candidate.

- Connect with your references and ask them to write you a letter of recommendation. Provide them with your resume and any information needed in order to submit your letter on time.
- Check with all institutions before the deadline to make sure your application and all supporting materials have been received.
- After acceptance, notify other colleges and universities that you have chosen a different program, so they may admit students on their waiting lists and send a deposit to the institution(s) you are interested in attending.
- Send thank-you notes to your references.
- Relax and enjoy the rest of your senior year!

# Academic GPA



**FOR STUDENTS** with marginal undergraduate grades, doing well academically in post-baccalaureate course work could enhance the probability of getting into the institution of your choice. The most commonly-used criterion for admission to graduate school is undergraduate grade-point average (GPA).

Why is GPA so important to admission committees? Unlike standardized tests, the GPA reflects your long-term academic success as a student. To a certain degree, beyond innate intelligence, it reflects your motivation to academically apply yourself. More weight is placed on the GPA with highly competitive graduate and professional school programs.

## Major GPA vs. Overall GPA

Depending on the program, admission committees look at your major GPA first, then your overall GPA. Other programs focus their attention on your GPA over the last two years, realizing that you may have changed majors or had some other factors influence your GPA during the first two years.

In addition to GPA, graduate and professional school programs look at the academic rigor of the courses you have taken. A high GPA comprised of a high percentage of introductory courses or “easy-A courses” will have less value than a GPA with more challenging subjects. Generally speaking, if the graduate or professional school knows the undergraduate institution and has a track record correlating student academic performance with undergraduate GPA, they may place more weight on the GPA, rather than other criteria, like standardized test scores.

It is true that in most graduate or professional school programs, grades are important means of evaluating applicants. It is also important to realize that this is only one of the important criteria and that a shortcoming in your grades can often be compensated by excellent performance on some of the other important criteria.

Consideration in other areas of evaluation is key when applying to graduate school with a less-than-stellar GPA. This may include things like having strong letters of recommendation, composing a well-thought out statement of purpose or personal statement and doing well on standardized tests. One of the best ways to compensate for mediocre grades is to get experience in the field in which you plan to study. Whether it be research or practical experience, doing so shows you are serious and committed to the area of interest and are likely to succeed while in graduate school.

You still do not think you can get into graduate school? Well, students applying directly to graduate or professional school gain acceptance to top-choice graduate schools, often with average grades. Grades can be extremely important, however, so if you know you are going to be attending graduate or professional school, you should do your best at all times, while trying to maintain a well-balanced academic, professional and personal life.

Another way to overcome grades as a criterion for selection into graduate and professional school is to visit the school and talk to the professors in the department.

*In addition to GPA, graduate and professional school programs look at the academic rigor of the courses you have taken.*



# Standardized Tests

**STANDARDIZED TESTS** have become a way of life for every student. Standardized tests level the playing field for admission staff when they evaluate the academic backgrounds of students from a variety of educational institutions.

The question remains: How do I best prepare for a standardized test? What effect will test scores have on getting into graduate or professional school? Test preparation is key when gearing up for any test; how you prepare is a very individual matter.

Some students elect to buy study guides or previously administered tests to prepare for standardized tests. Other students take free practice exams online. Various test preparation providers offer options such as classroom courses, virtual class meetings and weekend workshops.

## **Which standardized test do I need to take?**

Each program of study will provide information on which standardized test is required or acceptable to complete the admission application process. Each program is different, so be sure to get your facts from each individual institution and more specifically the adviser or admission representative for each specific program of study.

## **How do I prepare for a standardized test?**

Preparing takes time, so be sure you do this well in advance of the test date. While you might be able to retake the exam, it is best to plan ahead so you do as well as possible the first time you take it. Many schools will review your first score as well as any additional test scores.

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

This depends on which test you are taking, which type of graduate program you seek and when you want to start school. Talk with your current adviser and the admission staff at each of your prospective schools.

## **How important are my scores?**

All schools have a unique admission formula. Test scores are often just one factor the school considers when admitting applicants. Other key considerations are grades, recommendation letters, your personal statement and, in some cases, the interview.

Also worth noting is that some schools review multiple test scores differently from other schools. For example, some schools will take your best score, some will average all of your test scores together and some use only the most recent score. A school's admission office may be able to tell you which method they use.

## **Can I receive accommodations for a standardized test?**

Yes, you can receive accommodations if you have a documented disability. You should contact the host of the exam to arrange for the accommodations. Typical accommodations include extended time, a reader or a scribe. Contact the Career and Professional Development Center with any concerns about receiving accommodations.

## **Key Preparation Tips**

- Attend workshops: Take practice exams and attend offered workshops.
- Buy prep books: Any good bookstore will have many preparation books or guides, and the testing entities themselves provide study guides.
- Review the exam: Review an old copy of the exam to identify skill sets and the types of questions asked. You can usually find old copies of the exam in the registration booklet, on the test website or in study guides.
- Take the online sample tests: Some test prep companies offer free sample online tests.
- Take classroom courses or online courses: Be sure to do research prior to signing up for a class. They can be costly so it is important to understand what will be gained from the course.

# Personal Statements and Essays

**WRITING A** personal statement or application essay could have a profound effect on getting into the graduate and professional school of your choice. For many students this is often the most difficult part of the application process. It is critical that the essay is clear and compelling for the reader, so be sure to spend a considerable amount of time writing, editing and revising. A career consultant or professional can also read your essay or offer some advice, prior to submitting your final document.

## Admission or Application Essay

The admission or application essay is written by an applicant to the graduate or professional school in response to an assignment posed in the graduate application. These terms are often used interchangeably.

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## Personal Statement

The personal statement is more akin to writing your autobiography within the context of applying to a graduate or professional school program. In this case, you would describe your total life experiences and goals and what makes you a unique candidate.

In borderline cases, personal statements and essays can be pivotal if you can prove that you bring distinctive traits and experience to the table. In the few cases where the submission of a personal statement is optional with your application, it would be wise to submit one. This may give the admission committee compelling subjective information to admit you.

According to Peterson's, writing requirements vary widely. Some programs request only one or two paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, while others require numerous specific essays. Since personal statements/essays can reveal your character more clearly than other application materials, they may provide evidence that you bring something distinctive to the field.

## Writing the Essay or Personal Statement

### Self-Assessment

There are many things you must know before making a decision. Where will the graduate and professional school education lead you? What career paths are associated with this credential? Is there a demand for career fields associated with this specialized degree or credential? Will this degree or

professional designation necessitate living in a certain part of the country or world where this credential is in demand? What are the benefits and shortcomings of pursuing this degree and associated career paths? If you are still not sure after reading these questions, please visit the Career and Professional Development Center to validate your career interests and learn more about career paths.

### Getting Started

Research all institutions of interest. Part of the essay is to identify what is distinctive about the program and the institution. Why do you want to apply there, and why will the admission committee think you are a good fit for the program?

If the basic task of the essay is to follow directions and you do not do what they ask, the admission committee will question whether you will be able to follow directions in their program. Too many students think it is okay to ignore page and word limits when writing the essay. If you are over the word limit, rewrite and revise until you reach the target. However, be sure the key points you want to make are clear and concise. Typically, you want to show the reader the journey in reaching your academic and career goals, why their program is a good fit and what unique attributes you bring to the program and institution.

*Why is this program the right program for you?  
What is distinctive about the faculty or the recruiters  
who hire graduates of this institution?  
What do you like about the curriculum and perhaps  
the research facilities you might be using?*

### **Field of Study**

How you became interested in the field of study is a question you will no doubt be asked in either the essay or the interview. You may also be asked when you became interested in this field of study. No matter what the particular moment, you will want to give the reader a vivid scenario of the situation, task, action and result, much like you would do during an interview.

### **The Program**

Why is this program the right program for you? What is distinctive about the faculty or the recruiters who hire graduates of this institution? What do you like about the curriculum and perhaps the research facilities you might be using? Here is where you get to use the knowledge you have gathered from visiting the school, reading professional journals, researching its website and understanding rankings. Perhaps you have written to professors to learn more about the program or have become knowledgeable about specific faculty in those programs through your own faculty at Saint Vincent. It is highly advised that you mention appropriate and compelling reasons as to why you chose this institution.

### **Write About Yourself**

You can always write something about yourself. As we mentioned, it is good to relate specific activities or events that have shaped your decision to go into a specific field of study. Tell your story using a lot of concrete detail; this keeps the admission committee engaged. Although the essay is personal, you should not include any personal information that may be uncomfortable for the reader or can be interpreted incorrectly.

### **Research and Scholarly Activity**

There are very few undergraduate programs that require a senior thesis. You want to exploit this experience as a demonstration of your ability to do scholarly work. If you did not complete a thesis during your time at Saint Vincent, make a list of your undergraduate papers, memorable research projects or presentations that you are able to discuss. Also be sure to cite presentations and publications at academic conferences or other professional organizations.

### **Experiential Learning**

Explore your career goals through our SVC BearcatREADY Program. Experience in the work-place such as job shadowing, internships, part-time positions, on-campus student employment and community engagement all offer opportunities to engage with future employers, peers and graduates of Saint Vincent. Writing about how a practical experience has inspired your career will be an excellent addition to a graduate school application.

### **An Obstacle You Have Overcome**

Have you had to overcome adversity to get where you are today? Tell your story and what strengths and unique personal qualities you exemplify.

### **Study Abroad Experience**

Experiencing another culture demonstrates that you can adapt to unfamiliar environments. It also shows that you can interact or work with people with diverse backgrounds and ethnicity. By studying abroad, you show initiative and eagerness to undertake personal and academically challenging experiences. These experiences can be invaluable in getting into a world-class graduate or professional school program or the program of your choice.



# Letters of Recommendation

**THE LETTER** of recommendation is an essential component of the overall evaluation of a candidate. This letter fills in the gaps about your candidacy for graduate or professional school that are not conveyed in other aspects of your application. A convincing letter from a faculty member or previous internship supervisor can often persuade graduate admission committees. This can be particularly true if the committee is having a difficult time making a decision about whether or not you should be accepted into a specific program. These letters can serve as a very strong piece of the overall application process.

Depending on the graduate or professional school, there are certain technical, transferable, functional and adaptable skills not measured by standardized tests. These are broad-based skills such as critical thinking skills that are a hallmark of a liberal arts education. These skills are often written about in a letter of recommendation.

A good letter can provide admission committees with the “total package” of information that will supplement the criteria of grades, class rank and test scores. For instance, you may have one poor semester in an otherwise stellar academic background or one poor grade in a relevant course. You may also have a family, health or financial issue that was the reason for a substandard semester. A well-written letter of recommendation may be able to demonstrate your ability to overcome these issues, while discussing your positive and outstanding attributes.

## When Requesting a Letter of Recommendation:

- Ask the supervisor or faculty member if they could write you a strong letter of recommendation. If the potential reference cannot assure you that they can write a strong letter of recommendation, solicit another reference.
- Provide references with a transcript, updated resume, senior thesis, writing sample or portfolio.
- Be prepared! References may require that you list some talking points highlighting your strengths and why you think you would be a good candidate for a particular advanced degree or program.
- Keep the references apprised of application deadlines for letters of recommendation so they do not have to search for the information.
- Ask the references in a courteous manner about the current status of the letter.
- Be diplomatic and subtle; faculty members and professionals are very busy. It takes time and effort to write a strong letter of recommendation.

# References



**AN IMPORTANT** component of an application process is being able to provide appropriate references. An employer or graduate study program may use references as the last step to assess your candidacy.

## Guidelines

### Obtain Permission

Never give the name of someone without permission.

### Know What the Reference Will Say About You

It is perfectly acceptable to ask a potential reference if they can give you a strong recommendation. Identify people who are enthusiastic and easy to talk to since most reference checking is done by phone.

Students with physical or visible disabilities may benefit from asking their references to initiate the conversation about their abilities and past successes, in relation to the disability. This should only be done if the reference is contacted AFTER you interview with the employer.

### Provide Your References with Adequate Information

If possible, give your references a description of the job/graduate study program for which you are applying. If a complete description is not available, tell your references the kind of positions for which you are applying. If asking for a written reference, give the person adequate time to prepare a letter. Also provide them with your resume. It is also a good protocol to provide a reference with a resume.

### Remind Your References Occasionally

Someone may give you permission to use their name and not intend it as a perpetual request. Periodically, remind your references that someone may be calling. This is especially true when using former professors or those that you will have minimal contact with after graduation. Remember to write a thank-you note to your references as a courtesy.

### Tailor Your References to the Position

Develop separate lists of references for each type of position you are seeking. A psychology professor may be best in one instance and accounting professor in another. Your reference lists should not be static.

### Make Sure to Use Professional References

References should be supervisors or faculty members who know you in a professional context (Some companies will ask you for personal references, in addition to your professional ones).

### Reference Contact Information

When listing a reference, be sure you obtain their most up-to-date contact information. For example be sure to ask your references which telephone number and email they will be using during the time of your candidacy. Many contacts may not use the same contact information throughout the year. Be sure to keep this up to date as you continue to apply for internships, full-time positions or graduate programs.

Header (Should match your resume header)

Reference's Name  
Title  
Company/Institution/School Name  
Address  
Phone Number  
Email Address

Reference's Name  
Title  
Company/Institution/School Name  
Address  
Phone Number  
Email Address

Reference's Name  
Title  
Company/Institution/School Name  
Address  
Phone Number  
Email Address

# Graduate School Interview

**A REVIEW** of the literature and graduate and professional school websites reveals that admission interviews are becoming more commonplace. While interviews are not a requisite part of all graduate and professional applications, be prepared for the possibility of being interviewed. This is especially true if you will be working with faculty as a teaching assistant or research assistant. The faculty will be eager to meet you since the employer-employee relationship exists in addition to being accepted into a particular program.

## Prior to the Interview

- Dress professionally.
- Avoid strong perfumes and colognes.
- Cover any body art and remove piercings.
- Bring copies of your resume, portfolio and/or senior thesis.
- Learn about the program and faculty.
- Review faculty publications in your field of interest.
- Prepare at least three intelligent questions about the program or field of study that cannot be readily found on the school's homepage or publications.

## Sample Interview Questions

Being granted an interview is a significant step in the process of being accepted to the graduate or professional program on your targeted list. What questions can you expect? It depends on who is doing the interviewing. With faculty, the interview could revolve around your resume or senior thesis as a focal point. With admissions staff, you could encounter the traditional or behavioral questions listed in the interviewing section of this guide. You may also encounter these graduate school-based questions:

- If you are not accepted into graduate school, what are your plans?
- What do you know about our program?
- Why did you choose to apply to our program?
- What other schools are you considering?
- In what ways have your previous experiences prepared you for graduate study in our program?
- What do you believe your greatest challenge will be if you are accepted into this program?

- In college, what courses did you enjoy the most? The least? Why?
- Describe your research project (senior thesis).
- How would your professors describe you?
- What types of literature do you read in your spare time?
- What are your career goals? How will this program help you achieve your goals?

## Questions to Ask the Interviewer

- What percentage of graduates find employment related to their field of study after graduation?
- What types of employers hire graduates of this program? Where are these employers located?
- What changes do you foresee in the profession?
- What distinguishes the curriculum, in the eyes of the employers, from other institutions?
- What opportunities exist to work with faculty on their own research?

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