A Brief Guide on Applying to Graduate and Professional Schools

Graduate and professional schools can be a satisfying and often necessary way to pursue career goals or learn more about an area of interest. If you have given yourself wholeheartedly to a particular subject, have a strong academic record, and feel you can maintain the motivation for another 2-6 years of academic work, you should consider graduate school.

1. Know your career goals. Seek career counseling at SCS if you are unsure what area or degree to pursue and check out the SCS Career Exploration Library. Talk to your professors and advisor. Check out the American Psychological Association’s website at www.apa.org.

2. Ask faculty which programs they recommend and their reasons for recommending - remember their selection criteria may be different from yours.

3. Familiarize yourself with the current research in your interest area. Where are the people who are publishing interesting work? If you identify particular people you wish to work with, call or e-mail them to find out if they will be accepting new students to their lab, and whether your personalities match. It is often better to choose a prestigious person or program rather than a prestigious university.

4. Find information and application on the university website.

5. After receiving an application and more detailed information, find out what resources are available. Talk or e-mail with current students about their experiences to see how you would fit in. Ask about degree requirements, how long it takes to complete the program, and how major advisors are selected.

6. Find out about funding opportunities such as teaching, administrative or research assistantships. Assistantships are usually 20 hour a week jobs for which you may receive a salary, tuition waiver, or reduced tuition. Fellowships are outright grants of money, and are sometimes renewable for more than one year. You can research sources for national fellowships in the SCS library.

TIMELINE

This can vary depending on the type of program and whether early decision options are available. Being organized will be crucial for your success!

Spring/Summer Junior Year

* Take GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc. More information is available at the SCS Testing Office or at www.ets.org.

Early Fall Senior Year

* Save money for test and application fees.

* Request application information from programs.
* Take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE consist of 3 tests: Quantitative, Verbal, Analytical, and an optional Writing Assessment. It is advisable to study using the CD-Rom or books and take practice tests to become familiar with the style of questioning. Talk to the staff at the SCS Testing Office or check out the web page at www.ets.org. Testing dates are more flexible since this exam is computer based.

* Take the Psychology Subject Exam (GRE). Many programs require this exam while others recommend it. It is wise to take it since it is only offered three times a year as a paper exam.

* Start writing your personal statement or application essay. Use the SCS essay guide, which you can purchase at the SCS reception desk. OR consult Graduate Admissions Essays - What Works, What Doesn't and Why, by Donald Asher. His book goes beyond just writing the essay and gives excellent tips on the application process in general. You may find this book at the Student Counseling Service Library or you can purchase it.

* Request transcript copies for yourself, recommenders and schools. Include an unofficial transcript with your application packet with a note stating that an official transcript will be sent from ISU. If the application deadline is early January you will want to have the official transcript sent after fall grades are posted.

* Identify 3 appropriate people for recommendations who have seen your performance in different settings. You may want two from faculty and another from a work supervisor. Research shows that recommendations from high profile faculty are very valuable. If you do not know any professors, make an appointment with professors with whom you have received a good grade and share copies of your old papers or tests. If you have not been in school for a while, ask the graduate school about what type of letters they prefer. In general, waiving the right to see your letters increases their credibility.

* Later in the fall, provide recommenders with your resume, application essay, transcript and any special work that may assist with writing a strong letter. Give them the materials for all the schools you plan to apply to at the same time along with the SASE’s. If you will have a year or more off between graduating and applying to graduate schools, ask your professors to write letters for you now while they know you.

**Late Fall/Winter Break Senior Year**

* Most Ph.D. applications are due in January and M.S. deadlines are often mid-February. February 1 is a common deadline for applying for financial assistance.

* Complete applications. Be prepared to complete more than one per school, because sometimes the department and the graduate school want their own copies. It is best to apply to 6-12 schools depending on your grades and scores. You may apply to some "sure bets" some "long shots" and some in between, in terms of your chances of admission. Some schools have their information on the web page and allow you to apply by computer.
* Check to make sure recommenders have sent the letters.

* Have your portfolio prepared and practice interviewing if necessary. Go on campus visits if they are required or recommended.

**Spring Senior Year**

* April 15 is the deadline for universities to offer financial assistance.
* Decide which program to accept. Get any promises for funding in writing.
* Send letters to schools you have rejected informing them of your decision.
* Write thank you cards to your recommenders.
* If you do not get accepted the first time, consult your faculty advisor or counselor for feedback on how to proceed differently. You may need to retake a test, or apply to less competitive schools. Do not give up without evaluating your goals and efforts!