The Career Center’s

GUIDE TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL PROCESS

Career Center, Christian Brothers University
Barry Hall, Rooms 237-247
650 East Parkway South, Campus Box #2
Memphis, Tennessee 38104
Phone: (901) 321-3330 ◆ Fax: (901) 321-3332
career@cbu.edu ◆ www.cbu.edu/Career

© Copyright 2011, All Rights Reserved
A WORD ABOUT THIS PACKET...
This packet is designed to assist you in both thinking through your career-related goals, and understanding the graduate school application process. As you move through the sections of the packet, you should take careful consideration in thinking realistically about your answers to the outlined questions; assistance is always available from the Career Center if questions arise at any point during your thought process.

SHOULD YOU GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?
Graduate school is both time consuming and expensive; therefore, you should seriously consider your motives and goals for pursuing an advanced degree before beginning the extensive application process. There are numerous reasons people choose to attend graduate school; the following are eight of the more common ones:

1. see graduate school as a way to put off looking for a job.
2. consider graduate study because everyone else is pursuing advanced degrees.
3. have not decided what type of career to pursue and therefore opt to stay in school.
4. believe there are no available jobs.
5. are interested in specializing in a particular field of study.
6. are pursuing a professional position requiring an advanced degree.
7. hope to earn a higher salary with an advanced degree.
8. need graduate courses to fulfill professional continuing education requirements.

Although these are all valid arguments for attending graduate school, reasons five through eight are some of the more pertinent ones. Naturally, an advanced degree can never guarantee you will land a higher profile position, earn a better salary, or gain personal fulfillment; but the rationales are certainly more legitimate than allowing fear, peer pressure, or laziness to dictate your future. Regardless of your reasons for attending graduate school, you will want to seriously consider the following questions before beginning the admissions process:

"WHAT POSITION, OCCUPATION, OR CAREER FIELD WOULD YOU LIKE TO PURSUE?"
The most logical reason for pursuing an advanced degree centers around the need to possess an advanced degree in order to enter a particular position, occupation, or career field. Therefore, it is best to have a clear understanding of such career goals before applying for graduate schools and programs. Having an understanding of your career goals includes being aware of such variables as your personal interests, abilities, skills, and values. If you are unsure about such variables or your specific career goals, feel free to consult the resources in Career Center. The Career Center offers a variety of resources and assessments designed to both highlight your interests, abilities, skills, and values, and aid you in discovering occupations of interest to you. It would also be a good idea to research the employment outlook for your desired occupation, in order to avoid pursuing employment in a field already saturated with job searchers, or one that is prone to "extinction."

"DO YOU REALLY NEED AN ADVANCED DEGREE?"
Once you have discovered the type of occupation or career field of interest to you and have a clear understanding of positions you would like to pursue, you will want to determine whether you need an advanced degree to obtain such positions. Consult the Career Center for assistance in exploring such questions, as they are equipped with a variety of resources designed to assist you. Consulting various employment advertisements or individuals currently working in positions of interest to you may also give you an idea of the types of qualifications required for such positions. You may discover that career-related experience, not an advanced degree, is all that is needed to obtain your desired position.

"ARE YOU CONVINCED YOU LOVE YOUR CHOSEN FIELD OF STUDY?"
When you decide to pursue graduate study in a specific field, you are making a very important career choice, not simply going on for more school. Your professors will expect you to be extremely interested in your designated program, and view you as more of an associate than a student. The courses in your program will all focus on your specific field of study and there may be little room for electives that deviate from your program's chosen path. Therefore, if you are not thoroughly interested in your courses, you may find yourself struggling to finish the coursework required for your degree, and regretting the amount of time and money you have invested in your advanced education. In addition, when you do obtain your advanced degree and begin looking for employment, you may find yourself disliking the types of job responsibilities required of you.

"WHAT ARE YOUR SHORT-RANGE AND LONG-RANGE CAREER AND FAMILY GOALS?"
Before making significant career-related decisions, you should strongly consider your long- and short-range career and family goals. Ask yourself where you would like to be in regards to your career and family life in five years, ten years, or more. (For example, do want to get married, have children, etc.) Also ask yourself how your family goals fit into your career plans, or how your career goals fit into your plans for a family. Then ask yourself how you intend to achieve your career and family goals together.
"HAVE YOU CHOSEN THE RIGHT GRADUATE PROGRAM?"

Once you have discovered the type of occupation of interest to you, have a clear understanding of positions you would like to pursue, and are sure you have chosen the correct field of study, you will want to select a graduate program that is right for you. Research graduate schools that offer programs in your field of study, and then examine those particular programs. There are many variables to consider in this decision. When examining potential programs, consult college professors or individuals working in positions of interest to you on their opinions regarding the graduate schools and programs you are researching. Also, if possible, visit the campuses of those schools you are considering, and talk to both professors and students in your targeted programs. When researching programs, be sure to identify the following points:

- how many years will it take to obtain your degree?
- what types of courses will you be required to complete?
- does the program require to do complete a thesis or major research project?
- does the program require you to complete an internship in your field?
- does the program offer fellowships, scholarships, or graduate assistantships?
- how many hours does the programs involve?
- is the program accredited, and if so, by whom?
- will the program provide you will credentials and/or enable you to complete certification or licensure requirements needed for your particular position, occupation, or career field?
- will the program limit your career goals in any way?
- is the school located conveniently? If not, will it be necessary to move in order to attend?

Resist the temptation to base your decision to attend a particular institution solely on its reputation. The prestige and reputation of a particular graduate school will not mean anything if the school, program, and faculty do not accommodate your career-related goals. It would be wise to research the faculty who will be teaching and supporting you in your graduate studies. Find out what types of research they have completed, on which topics they have written articles or books, and the direction they would like your graduate program to take. Make sure that your interests coincide with their interests, or you may find yourself devoting hours to projects that are of no interest to you. Remember that the faculty in your graduate program will be your mentors; therefore, it certainly works to your advantage if you can get along with them!

"DO YOU NEED A BREAK FROM SCHOOL?"

You might know what occupation you would like to pursue; you are probably aware that positions within that occupation require advanced degrees; and you probably love your chosen field of study. However, if you are burnt out on studying and homework, you may want to seriously consider taking a break from school. You could use your time to gain career-related experience, which will help to confirm your career goals and give you time to earn money to pay for your tuition. Such a break will allow you time to recuperate from years of schooling and mentally prepare yourself for what’s ahead. You will value your graduate school experience much more if you are ready for its challenge. Consider that the workload in grad school will most likely exceed that of your undergraduate degree.

"WILL CAREER-RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE HELP YOU GET INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL?"

Some graduate programs will not accept you straight out of undergraduate school and/or without relevant career-related experience. Such programs prefer that you have gained career-related experience in the "real world" in order to both assure them that you have had a taste of the real world, and are interested in pursuing an advanced degree for the right reasons. Therefore, in order to improve your chances for acceptance, it is important that you gain experience in your field prior to graduating with your undergraduate degree. Career-related experience can be obtained through full-time, part-time, temporary, internship, co-op, and volunteer positions. If you are considering any form of employment, check with the Career Center to see what opportunities are available.

"HOW WILL YOU PAY FOR YOUR TUITION AND LIVING EXPENSES?"

If you are currently working in a career-related position for a company with whom you would like to continue working, inquire to your human resources director about the possibility of the company paying for your advanced education. Many companies understand the need for their employees to upgrade their knowledge, and therefore will support continuing education for their employees. If you are not currently working or if your employer is not interested in supporting your advanced education, you might investigate the possibility that your targeted graduate school and program offers opportunities to pay for your tuition; some school offer program to finance your education either by working during your time at school, or after you have obtained your degree. It is always a good idea to investigate the availability of financial aid as well. There are three basic types of financial aid: grants and fellowships, work programs, and loans. Financial aid may also be provided from other sources, including: foundations, corporations, private organizations, educational institutions, and the government. Consult the school's Financial Aid Office or Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs for more information on such opportunities.
STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL PROCESS

Applying to graduate schools and programs is more involved than applying to undergraduate institutions. The process is more complicated and procedures more in-depth, depending on the schools and programs to which you apply. The following steps are designed to assist you in understanding this potentially complex process:

CONSULT MORE THAN ONE GRADUATE SCHOOL OFFICE

Unlike undergraduate institutions, graduate schools often require you to apply to both the graduate school and particular graduate program of interest to you. Therefore, to ensure obtaining all required admission materials, you will want to contact both the Graduate School Admissions Office and the department of your chosen graduate program. Consult the Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs or catalogs from specific colleges and universities in the Career Center for phone numbers, addresses, and additional information on graduate schools and programs.

LEARN TO THINK LIKE THE GRADUATE PROGRAM ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE

It is the responsibility of the graduate program admissions committee to evaluate your success in their graduate program. If they suspect you have not been well prepared, and therefore may not succeed in their program, they will not accept your application. Treat the admission process as you would an interview, as it is very much the same type of experience. You want to display your absolute best work, as graduate school programs have numerous applicants and a limited number of available openings. Think about the criteria from which they base their student selections, and what information they are trying to derive through their application process. Then strive to submit an application containing such sought-after information.

UNDERSTAND THE DYNAMICS OF THE CRITERIA USED IN THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

Virtually all graduate schools and programs will require you to submit copies of your undergraduate institution transcripts and graduate admissions test scores when applying. The following is an overview of these criteria:

**Graduate Admissions Tests:** Graduate schools require that you submit copies of your test scores so that they may evaluate how likely you are to succeed in a particular graduate program. Some of the more common tests include the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), and the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). Specific graduate programs may require you to submit scores of other tests in addition to those required by the graduate school. The Career Center provides LSAT, GRE, and GMAT registration booklets free of charge, and other types of registration booklets may be ordered upon request.

**Transcripts:** Graduate schools require you to submit copies of your transcripts so they may evaluate your academic preparation for a particular graduate program. When examining a transcript, they may consider your grade point average, the difficulty of your courses, your course load, and the reputation of your undergraduate institution. Be sure to request transcripts from the Registrar's Office of your undergraduate institution well in advance of the application deadline, as they may take longer to produce than you anticipate. While undergraduate institutions may rely exclusively on grades and standardized tests to determine admittance, graduate schools and programs often incorporate the following additional criteria into their process:

**Interviews:** Some graduate programs, such as those specializing in medicine or business, require you to appear for an interview. Although most people dread appearing for interviews, they are actually an excellent way for potential students to persuade an admissions committee that they should be admitted into a particular program. You should prepare for such interviews as you would a job interview. Think about possible questions you might be asked and how you would respond to them. Also, dress in appropriate interview attire. The Career Center offers a comprehensive packet, workshop, videos, and books to assist you in preparing for interviews.

**Portfolios:** Some graduate programs, such as those specializing in art, architecture, journalism, and environmental design, may require you to submit a portfolio as part of their application process. Portfolios involve a collection of your best work, and are used to demonstrate your abilities in a particular career field. They should also reveal the breadth of your training and experience.

**Application Essays:** Typically, essays or personal statements are the most intimidating part of the application process. Some graduate programs require you to write a couple paragraphs explaining your reasons for pursuing graduate study, while others prefer several separate essays discussing a variety of topics. Application essays are essentially statements about your personal ideas and goals. Although there are usually no strict guidelines to follow, admissions committees typically use such essays to gather a variety of information about you. Thus, what you include in your statements is very important and should convey the following:
a clear vision of how you intend to use your degree
enthusiasm for your chosen field of study
relevant career-related or research-related experience
relevant educational background
a desire to attend their graduate school and program
logical immediate and long term goals
a unique personality that would contribute to the diversity of the program's class
strong writing and communication skills

Construct such essays as you would any other school-related paper, and remember to pay close attention to grammar and spelling. You will also want to have your essays typed and proofed.

Letters of Recommendation: Most graduate schools require a minimum of three letters of recommendation when applying to their programs. Although most programs prefer letters from faculty members, some will accept letters from professionals in your chosen field of study. Choosing people to write letters and serve as references can be challenging. Begin the process by identifying course professors, supervisors from extracurricular activities, and work-related supervisors. Although each reference will not match every criteria perfectly, use the following criteria guidelines when selecting them. Strive to find references who:

- think highly of you
- know you well in more than one area of your life
- are familiar with the graduate schools and programs to which you are applying
- are aware of your chosen course of study
- have associated with a significant number of students and therefore be able to make a favorable comparison of you to people similar in age to you
- are recognized by the admissions committee as someone with respectable judgment
- possess good written communication skills.

Approaching people you believe would serve as good references can be awkward. You may be concerned that a potential reference does not know you well enough or have enough time to write a good letter. If you need a reference and would like for him/her to represent you, however, it is best that you talk to him/her about your wish. It is wise to approach professors early in the semester, as their schedules have a tendency of getting busier as the semester progresses, and they may hesitate accommodating you because of time restraints. Ask potential references if they know enough about you to write letters of recommendation. Some may be happy to write a letter for you, but need a little more background information from which to assist them, while others may not feel they are qualified to write such a letter. Regardless of how well potential references know you, you can assist them greatly in the writing of their letters by providing them with transcripts, a resume, a copy of your application essay, and a copy of a research paper. Be sure to also provide them with any necessary recommendation forms, as well as, appropriately stamped and addressed envelopes. In the application process, you may be asked whether you want to waive or retain the right to read your letters of recommendation. Contrary to what you might think, in most cases, you should actually waive your right to read the letters. Many professors will not write letters unless they are confidential, and many believe that waiving the right to read a letter increases its value to the admissions committee.

BE AWARE OF THE COMMON REASONS YOUR APPLICATION MAY BE REJECTED
There are numerous reasons a graduate school and program may reject your application. Although some reasons may be beyond your control, others may be avoidable. The following are a few of such reasons:

- poor undergraduate grades or low graduate admissions test scores
- inappropriate undergraduate curriculum or lack of academic prerequisites
- ineffective letters of recommendation and/or poor interview or portfolio
- lack of career-related experience, extracurricular activities, or volunteer experience
- failure to submit application materials before the application deadline
- an incomplete application

FOLLOW ALL APPLICATION GUIDELINES
You must comply with all application guidelines established by the graduate school and program or risk being disqualified from the selection process, so be sure to read all instructions carefully. Some graduate schools and programs prefer that you mail all application materials to them in one package; this type of process is referred to as a self-managed application process. Others, however, allow materials to filter into their offices as they are obtained by potential students. Most graduate schools also require you to pay an application fee upon submitting your application.
materials. Such fees usually range between $10 and $50. Please be aware that it is possible to be accepted to a particular graduate school but rejected from your particular program of interest.

In order to meet specific application guidelines, you need to begin gathering required materials early. Most potential students need to begin the process approximately 15 months before they anticipate being admitted to a particular graduate school and program. Others seeking national scholarships, applying to health-care programs, or applying to law schools may need to begin as much as two full years before admittance. Although most application deadlines for graduate schools and programs beginning in the Fall are between January and March of that year, others are set for August, one full year before the start of the program.

The following timetable, which has been adapted from *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview*, suggests an ideal timetable for most applicants:

**Approximately 15 months before beginning graduate school:**
- Research areas of interest, graduate schools, and graduate programs.
- Obtain information and application materials from graduate schools and programs.
- Register and prepare for required graduate school admissions tests.
- Investigate national scholarships and graduate school assistantships, if desired.
- Request letters of recommendation, if required.

**Approximately three months before application deadline:**
- Take required graduate school admissions tests.
- Confirm application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- Visit potential graduate schools and programs, if possible.
- Write application essays or compile portfolio, if required.
- Request required transcripts from your undergraduate institution.
- Register for national applications or data assembly service if applying to medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school programs where it is required and used.

**Immediately prior to application deadline:**
- Forward completed application packet to desired graduate schools and programs.
- Consult desired graduate schools and programs to ensure your application file is complete.

**Upon learning that you have been accepted by your chosen graduate school and program:**
- Inform other graduate schools and programs of your decision to attend another institution.
- Contact those people who wrote letters of recommendation for you to both thank them for their letters and inform them of your acceptance into a particular graduate school and program.

**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I NEED TO REVIEW OR CONSIDER?**
The staff and vast resources at the Career Center can assist you in researching and answering any questions you might have about this packet. The Career Center offers a variety of other handouts, workshops, and books designed to assist you with understanding and completing each stage of the graduate school application process.

As previously mentioned, the Career Center also offers videos, brochures, catalogs, and applications for many specific graduate schools and programs, as well as specific graduate admissions test registration booklets. Applying to graduate school is similar to conducting a job search; as such, you might also benefit from the variety of information on resume writing, interviewing, and networking located in the Career Center.