

The Graduate Application Process

Time Table

Start gathering information early to be able to complete your application(s) on time. Most individuals should begin the process a year to a year and a half before the anticipated enrollment date (depending on the application deadline). You may need to allow additional time to successfully complete graduate admission tests and arrange for letters of recommendation.

Application deadlines might be as early as August 1 (a year prior to matriculation) for early decision programs at medical schools using the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS). Most deadlines for fall entry are between January and March. It is crucial to meet all formal deadlines. Late spring and summer are other potential deadlines (when beginning graduate school in the fall) for programs that operate on a rolling admissions basis. Be aware that many schools with rolling admissions encourage and act upon early applications; therefore, applying early is usually advantageous. This will show enthusiasm for the program and gives admissions committees more time to evaluate subjective components of your application. You will not be reviewed on just the “numbers.” Applicants are usually not rejected early unless they are clearly below an institution’s standards.

You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are early or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. In any case, keep in mind the various application requirements and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

Ideal Timetable for Most Applicants

Six months prior to applying:

- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs
- Talk to advisors about application requirements
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests
- Investigate national scholarships
- Ask for all letters of recommendation (if applicable)
- Take required graduate admissions tests

Three months prior to applying:

- If needed, retake required graduate admissions tests
- Obtain application materials (transcripts, for example)
- Write your application essay or personal statement
- Verify application deadlines and rolling admissions policies
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service

Fall (before matriculating in the fall):

- Complete Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Financial Aid PROFILE, if required

Spring (before matriculating in the fall):

- Check with the institution before deadlines to verify your file is complete
- Visit institutions you received acceptance from
- Send a deposit to your institution of choice
- Notify other institutions that accepted you so they can admit students on their waiting list
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote recommendation letters

Graduate School Application Packet

This is standard information in an application packet; however, keep in mind that each school you apply to may require different pieces of information and not every school requires all of these items.

- I. Application
(Mostly online)**
- II. Official Shepherd University Transcript
(Request in RAIL or in the Registrar's Office)**
- III. Personal Statement
(See guidelines in this tutorial)**
- IV. Writing Sample or Essay**
- V. Resume**
- VI. Graduate School Admission Exam**
- VII. Letters of Recommendation**
- VIII. Application Fee**

Faculty Recommendations: Points of Reference

Graduate school recommendations weigh heavily when an admissions committee is trying to decide between you and other candidates. Most departments will request three to five letters of recommendation. Who should you ask for letters of recommendation? At least one letter, and preferably two or more, should come from faculty members in your field of study. You may also wish to obtain a recommendation from a professor in an unrelated discipline (perhaps your minor field) in order to show the depth of your academic interests.

These Guidelines Can Give You the Edge:

- Begin developing a relationship with your recommenders several semesters, or even years, before you will need the letter of recommendation. It is important that they know several facts about you: your character, your course work, your initiative, and your communication skills. Keep them up to date on your achievements, either verbally or in writing.
- Determine who will be your best advocates. If you hear reticence or complaints about not having enough time to write the recommendations or not knowing you well enough, be ready to back off. If someone feels forced into writing you a recommendation, you can bet it will not be as positive as you might want or expect.
- Discuss the references with your recommenders. Inform them of any points you would like them to incorporate into your letter. Ask them to use as many specific examples as possible.
- The recommendation letter could be a place to highlight a smaller accomplishment that you did not include elsewhere in the application or resume.
- Give your recommenders' telephone numbers on applications. Admissions officers are inclined to place a phone call to a recommender for more details.
- Do not use references from friends or relatives.
- Give your recommenders all of the necessary forms, plus addressed, stamped envelopes.
- Remind/notify your references if they have been sent an email/link to submit their letters electronically.
- Give your recommenders at least one month to write the letter and ask them to meet a deadline.
- Let the recommenders know when you will submit your applications so he/she can send the reference letters at the same time.
- Reference letters can be confidential or non-confidential. Admissions officers may give more credence to a reference if you have waived your right to read it. You will need to decide the advantages or disadvantages of either choice.

Graduate School Interviews

The majority of schools use what is known as a structured interview. In this type of interview, the same questions are asked to all the applicants in the same order. These questions are also designed to shed light into who you are. Use the following as a reference guide to think about these areas in relation to yourself. Try to assess ways in which questions may be posed to you to cover these areas.

1. SUPPORT SYSTEM

Who does the candidate turn to in times of need to obtain help or advice? A student who is unable to seek help may be more at risk for not completing the graduate school program.

2. WORK EXPOSURE

What information does the candidate know about his/her chosen career? Is the student's knowledge coming from family, friends, personal experience or reading? How realistic is the understanding? What is the level of awareness of the changes in graduate work today? What other professions have been ruled out in coming to this choice?

3. MOTIVATION

How has the student tested out his/her interest in graduate work? What level of responsibility has the student assumed for others? Can a student describe the values that he/she possesses that will sustain motivation in difficult times? Who are the role models that have been most significant in influencing career choice of graduate work? Is there anything that would cause a student to lose interest in graduate work?

4. PERSONAL QUALITIES

Poise, confidence, communication, sense of humor, and proper use of the English language will all be assessed by the interviewer. Interviewers will want to know the level of applicant's maturity. They will seek to understand the student's operating style, and whether he/she possesses the qualities needed to succeed in the intended field of study. In addition, interviewers will assess whether the student is sufficiently flexible or capable of managing the substantial changes that lie ahead.

5. SOCIAL AWARENESS

How informed is the candidate about local and national issues? Has the student taken a stance on any area of social concern? What is the level of awareness of some of the important ethical issues impacting us today? Has the student ever acted upon his/her political or social conscience?

6. CARING, COMPASSION AND CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

If you wanted to convince someone that you are conscientious, how would you go about it? Caring and compassion should be exhibited daily. Are you willing to take a risk that might benefit a colleague or friend? What are your feelings about your abilities to be compassionate; yet remain sufficiently objective?

Questions will most often be presented in an open-ended, abstract manner; few questions should be answered with yes/no response. If you don't understand the question, seek clarification. Interviewers will be assessing whether your thinking style is more abstract or concrete in nature. Other areas that interviewers will assess include:

- your ability to understand the question being posed
- your depth of knowledge in providing the response
- whether you can synthesize from one experience to the next
- what you learned about yourself from various experiences/events
- evidences of maturity and professional judgment
- what weaknesses are you working on

Internal consistency is important in your responses. If you make negative comments, interviewers will likely follow up with questions. The interviewers will be trying to determine whether any of these disparaging comments might interfere with success.

Admissions Decisions

At most institutions, once the graduate school office has received all of your application materials, your file is sent directly to the academic department. A faculty committee (or the department chair) then makes a recommendation to the chief graduate school officer (graduate dean or vice-president) who is responsible for the final admission decision. Professional schools, at most institutions, act independently of the graduate school office. Applications are submitted to them directly, and they make their own admissions decisions.

Primary Factors Considered:

- Undergraduate grade point average
- Letters of recommendation
- Graduate admissions test scores
- Statement of Purpose/ Essay
- Resume

Also Taken into Account (may vary depending on the program):

- Appropriateness of the undergraduate degree
- Interview
- Audition or evidence of talent
- Work or research experience/ internships/ co-ops
- Leadership and extracurricular activities
- Honors and awards

Normally the student's total record is examined closely, and the weight assigned to specific factors fluctuates from program to program.

Common Reasons Applicants are Rejected:

- Inappropriate undergraduate curriculum/ lack of academic prerequisites
- Poor grades
- Low admissions test scores
- Weak or ineffective recommendation letters and/or statement of purpose/ essay/ resume
- Poor interview, portfolio, or audition
- Lack of extracurricular activities, volunteer experience, or research activities

To give yourself the best chance of being admitted, try to make a realistic assessment of an institution's admissions standards and your own qualifications. Remember that missing deadlines and filing an incomplete application will likely lead to rejection. Be sure that all application materials are received on time.