

## CHOOSING AND APPLYING FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Graduate school applications in any field of study are complicated and the selection process is highly competitive.**

- *Do not waste your effort if you are UNSURE of what you want to study and why you need to study a particular topic.* General interests in a field are fine, but you need to be as specific as possible about your particular interest before you begin your applications.
- For Ph.D. programs, it helps to actually spell out your plans for a dissertation topic *when you are applying.*
- Some schools will not let you defer entry after acceptance, so be sure you want to go to school the following year.

**To find out more about a particular field, talk to your tutors and St. John's alumni.**

- Tutors and alumni can share their own experiences, help you determine which fields are most closely related to your particular interests, and also suggest universities which are compatible with what you want to study.
- Tutors can be helpful in explaining the graduate school environment and what you should be looking for in terms of faculty and facilities as you are researching schools.

**Another part of your research should include going to the library and reading journals or looking up articles on the Internet that have been written by the faculty at your intended graduate schools.**

- Most schools have a "publish or perish" tenure policy for their professors, so scholarly articles on current ideas and research are always being published by faculty members.
- If the Meem Library doesn't have a copy of the journal you need, you aren't sure which journal you need, or are having difficulty with an Internet search – ask the librarians for help. The library has a program called "First Search" which can locate books, magazines, journals and articles by topic, title, or author.
- Use the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, which can be found in the Career Services Office Resource Library, or online at: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>, to learn more about specific careers and the degrees needed for each. Other good resources in the Career Service Library include *The Real Guide to Graduate School (Humanities and Social Sciences)* and *Getting What You Came For*.

**Graduate school is where you will establish important contacts for the rest of your profession.**

- It is helpful to apply to schools in a part of the country where you would like to stay, and to study with individuals in a department with whom you want to exchange ideas for some time.

### STEPS IN RESEARCHING AND APPLYING:

**Spring of Sophomore Year or early in Junior Year:**

- Assess yourself as a candidate.
- Find out what your St. John's grade point average (GPA) is since most schools have a minimum GPA that they will accept.
- Write a list of your strengths and weaknesses so that you may best represent yourself through your applications.

### Junior Year or early in summer after Junior Year:

- Research the graduate schools in your chosen field. Start with the Peterson's *Graduate School Guides* ([www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)) or *GradSchools.com* (<http://www.gradschools.com/>).
- Read the listings and web pages for all the schools with a department in your field.
- Speak with tutors, alumni, friends, family, and the Career Services Office to see what they know about the schools.
- Make a list of 10-20 schools that sound interesting and *prioritize YOUR own criteria for choosing a graduate school.*
  - What is most important to you as an individual graduate student? Is it cost, location, financial aid, program ratings, the focus of the program, specific faculty members, faculty/student ratio, availability of housing, pre-requisites for admission, test scores, GPA range of successful applicants, placement rates, alumni support, or the ability to take classes from other departments?
  - These are just a few important things to be considered and their order of priority will be different for each student. If you decide to consult ranking guides such as *U.S. News and World Report's Guide to the Best Graduate Schools* ([www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com)), keep in mind that these are highly subjective and usually not very scientific. Use them as a part of your total research plan, *not as the final word on what would be the best school for YOU.*

### Spring of Junior Year or Summer after Junior Year:

- As you start narrowing your choices of schools, determine whether you need to take a test for admission. The most common tests are:
  - GRE (Graduate Record Exam) – required by 90% of all graduate schools, [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)
  - LSAT (Law School Admissions Test), [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)
  - GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test – for business schools) [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)
  - MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) [www.aamc.org/students](http://www.aamc.org/students).
- Don't just **assume** that you can do well on these tests. **STUDY**. Whether that means taking practice tests on your own or enrolling in a prep course (i.e. Kaplan, Princeton Review) and attending classes is up to you. You are the best judge of how motivated you are and how well you might be able to study on your own, or whether you need the impetus of having shelled out money for a class to make you take this seriously. No matter which route you choose, take MANY practice tests before the date of the exam to become familiar with the type of questions and so you have an idea of what your score range will be.
- Take the actual test under the best of conditions -- at your convenience, when you are well-rested and well-prepared. The GRE and GMAT are offered only via computer-based testing and are given at test centers across the country all year long. However, schedule your exam as early as possible; **test centers fill up fast in the fall**. Take the GRE subject test if your field requires it. For all of these tests, take them as early as possible so that if your scores aren't very good, you can study more and retake the test.
- Be aware of the registration deadlines for the **LSAT** and **MCAT**. Each of these exams is given only 2-3 times each year, with the registration deadlines being 4-6 weeks before each test. Actual test dates, enrollment instructions, and costs can be found at the web sites mentioned above.
- And speaking of money, graduate entrance exams are used not only to determine whether you will be accepted to a specific school. They are often factored in when you are being considered for financial aid. The higher your score, the more chance you have of getting a financial aid offer in the form of scholarships, grants, teaching assistantships, living stipends, or full tuition remission.

### Spring of Junior Year or Summer after Junior Year:

- At the same time that you are preparing for the appropriate admission test, obtain application information from the schools on your first list. Most applications are now on-line.
- Get to know as much as possible about the departments and professors by digging into each school's web site. Once you have specific questions for which you couldn't find answers on the school or

department's web site, write, call or e-mail the graduate admissions coordinators and faculty members of programs that interest you. Ask questions about the professors' work, articles, research, whether need or merit determines financial aid, their placement rates, and anything else that is of specific interest to you as a prospective student. The professors actually may be on the Admissions Committees and could recommend you if they remember you in positive terms (curious, persistent, thoughtful, didn't waste their time). Graduate admissions coordinators can help you with specific questions about the application process and how their department is structured. **Don't ask about information already provided on their web site, unless there is something you truly don't understand.**

- Find out if there are current graduate students you can speak with about a particular program or professor. Web sites and faculty are supposed to paint the brightest picture. Graduate students will give you valuable information about the day-to-day workings of the classes, professors, department and school.

#### **Summer after Junior Year or Fall of Senior Year:**

- As you are narrowing your choices of schools, you should be thinking about how you plan to pay for your graduate education.
  - Do the schools offer general scholarships or fellowships?
  - Does your department offer financial aid and, if so, what kind and how much?
  - Will you need to take out more loans, or are there specific national/international scholarships that can be used for the type of education which you are proposing to pursue?
    - If you are planning to take a second BA or an MPhil at Oxford or Cambridge and you have top-notch grades at St. John's, experience with athletics, and a record of community service, think about applying for the Rhodes or Gates Scholarships.
    - If you want to study somewhere else in the UK and have really amazing grades, look into the British Marshall Scholarships.
    - If you want to spend a year in Greece studying the olive oil industry or ancient forms of baking, the Fulbright might be just what you need.
- **Be sure to contact the Career Services Office in the spring of your junior year or during the summer between your junior and senior years if you are interested in these or any other major scholarship competitions.** *On-campus deadlines are generally early-September to early-October, so starting on one of these applications after you return to school in the fall makes it impossible to put together a top-notch entry.*

#### **Summer after your Junior Year or Fall of your Senior Year:**

- If you want to go directly to graduate school after St. John's, try to visit some of your top choices during the summer between your junior and senior years. (If you are planning to take some time off before graduate school, these visits can be scheduled later.)
- You can only learn so much from the Internet, catalogs, e-mail and phone calls. You need to actually get the "feel" of the school and the community where you are proposing to spend 2-8 years of your life. If possible, make arrangements for a campus visit that includes attending a class, meeting with members of both the admissions office and your individual department, and above all else, time to speak with current graduate students. Students can give you the inside scoop on the quality of the program and whether they are still glad that they chose to attend that particular school. Campus visits can help you avoid spending time and money at a school that does not meet your needs. These visits can also be made after you have received acceptances and are trying to make a final decision on where to attend, but leaving visits that late could mean that you have inadvertently applied and been accepted to a school that really doesn't meet your needs. Keep that in mind and **try to visit as early as possible.**

#### **Later Summer before or early in the Fall of your Senior Year:**

- Based on returned phone calls, letters, e-mails, campus visits, answers, or lack of them, you should be able to narrow your original list of 10 - 20 schools down to about 4-8 schools to which to apply.

- **PREPARE TO SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATIONS IN EARLY. Don't wait until the published deadline. All the spots already may be filled or all the financial aid may have been allotted if you wait until that official deadline.**
- Some programs may require an interview, so the earlier you apply, the earlier you can interview, and the earlier the Admissions Committee may be able to make their decision
- *Due to current economic conditions, the volume of applications to all graduate and professional schools is extremely high and increasing. This makes it essential for you to prepare multiple applications that can be submitted as early as possible.*

#### **Junior Year, Summer following Junior Year, or Fall of Senior Year:**

- Request letters of recommendation from employers and tutors EARLY. It will only cause headaches for you and your recommenders if you wait until the last minute. Some recommenders may say “No,” if your deadline is too close to when you request the letter.
- Recommenders cannot always drop everything to write you a letter, so allow them plenty of time – at least a month, if possible.
- Give each recommender as much information as possible about the reason you are requesting the letter: Is this for graduate school, an internship or a job? How will this be part of your overall career goals? How is the letter to be submitted (on line or hard copy)? What is the deadline for submitting the letter?
- Decide whether or not you want to waive your right to see the letters. *When making this decision, keep in mind that admissions committees do not give the same weight to letters to which you have access!*
- For letters that need to be submitted on line, register all the recommenders early so they receive instructions from the schools and have time to write and upload the letters without rushing.
- If your schools require hard copies of letters, provide all your recommenders with pre-addressed stamped envelopes, reference forms, and a general description of the programs to which you are applying.
- **HAVE AN ELECTRONIC COPY OF EACH RECOMMENDATION LETTER SENT TO THE CAREER SERVICES OFFICE FOR YOUR FILE.** This can be especially valuable if you add additional schools later in the process or you need to reapply in future years.
- The easier you make it for your recommenders to complete these letters the happier they will be. Remind tutors that Career Services is available to assist them with the preparation and sending of letters of recommendation. ***NEVER*** expect any of your recommenders to provide envelopes and /or postage for letters of recommendation. Once the letters have been sent or placed in your Career Services file, send a thank you note to each writer and follow up with news about your plans for graduate school, i.e. acceptance, rejections, scholarships/fellowships.

#### **Fall of Senior Year:**

- Give a written request to the St. John's College Registrar for your transcripts to be sent ***long before the deadline***. If you have attended other colleges, you need to contact their registrars separately to have those transcripts sent as well. *Check frequently to make sure these requests have been fulfilled.*

#### **Summer after Junior Year or Fall of Senior Year:**

- A statement of what you want to study, your plans for the future, and why you want to study at a particular school, will be required for most applications. This may be called a “Statement of Purpose” or a “Letter of Intent.” Many programs do not conduct interviews, so this might be your only chance to let the Admissions Committee know who you are, what makes you unique, and why you would be a good addition to the diversity of their class.
- Write your statement clearly and thoughtfully. This is not the time for a rambling philosophical treatise. You need to sound intelligent, competent, excited about learning, and unique -- not generic.
- Let the Admissions Committee see how you think, what your priorities and goals are, and what you know about their school. Show your devotion to the field. Take the time to consider what you really want to study at their school, how it fits with what you have done at St. John's, and how it will be a

stepping-stone to your future career goals.

- **Do not apologize for having attended St. John's.** Make positive statements about your strong, interdisciplinary, liberal arts background and how that will be an asset for graduate school.
- Admissions Committees are not going to check five years from now to see if you are doing what you said in your application. **However, if you don't show evidence of focused thought and purpose in this statement -- and throughout your application process -- YOU will never get a chance to see what's possible in five years time!**
- Writing a successful statement of purpose will take time and many drafts. Don't expect to write it in one sitting on the night before the application is due. Everybody needs to write a few drafts and refine their thoughts before they arrive at a tight, well-crafted statement.
- Have several people edit your statement of purpose – friends, writing assistants, tutors, and Career Services staff. *(The Career Services Office has guidelines for writing statements of purpose and examples of what admissions committees are seeking.)*

#### **Summer after Junior Year or Fall of Senior Year:**

- Bring or email drafts of your application materials (application form, statement of purpose, essays, resume, etc.) to the Career Services Office for editing and review.
- Graduate school is an important step that will affect the rest of your life and graduate school admissions are becoming more competitive each year, so it is extremely important to devote sufficient time to this process so that your application can be outstanding.

#### **Fall or early Spring of Senior Year – hopefully 2-3 weeks prior to deadlines:**

- Complete your online applications and upload transcripts, statements of purpose, and supplemental materials, such as writing samples.
- If you need to send any hard copies, put them all in one package if possible. This makes your file easier to process by Admissions offices, with less chance of lost items.
- Allow about a week for your applications to be received and documented, and then call each school to make sure they received all the parts of your application. (Online application systems may send you an email letting you know that your application has been received.) Ask if anything else is required to complete your file. Follow up on missing items until you are sure they have arrived.
- *Financial aid applications are usually separate and need to be completed as soon as forms are available. Each school will have a different form for financial aid and its own deadlines. Be sure to keep these straight!*

#### **Spring of Senior Year:**

- Wait for acceptance, wait-list, or rejection letters.
- Don't be afraid to negotiate, bargain, and haggle for acceptance and financial assistance. Schools always accept students who choose not to attend. As students decline acceptances, the schools move down the wait-list making offers.
- Be proactive. Call and ask about the status of your application, but don't badger the admissions people.
- If you've formed a relationship with a member of a specific department, ask them what they have heard about the process or ask them to inquire on your behalf. Keep in mind that many schools will not offer much aid to first-year graduate students, because they want to see your performance in their curriculum before offering you more.

*If you have questions about any part of the graduate school application process, please come by the Career Services Office for help. We are happy to meet with you weekly or even daily as your deadlines draw near. We have many years of experience and are glad to assist you in any way possible.*

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