

## **The Graduate School Application Process: A Suggested Timeline**

Students seriously considering graduate school should begin to prepare during their junior year of college. The graduate application process can be time consuming and multi-faceted; advanced planning will greatly enhance your chances of being accepted to the school of your choice. Use the following timeline as a guide to the necessary steps that you will need to take in order to present a strong application to the admissions committee of your chosen schools:

### **February      ► REQUEST CATALOGUES                      ► APPLY FOR SUMMER INTERNSHIPS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

- Request catalogues (but not applications at this point) from the schools that you think you may apply to, and pay particular attention to the academic pre-requisites for each school on your list. You may need to take summer school and/or senior-year courses specifically to meet those pre-requisites.
- Depending on what discipline you are pursuing, consider applying for summer internships and fellowships, especially if you have no prior research experience in your field. This is especially important in the social sciences.
- Find out what standardized tests the schools you are interested in require. Ph.D. programs require at least the GRE General test, and many require subject tests as well. Make plans to prepare for the exam(s), preferably by taking a test prep course.
- Speak to faculty in your major about your plans. Seek their advice on which schools may be best suited to your pursuits, and ask if they know any faculty members at those schools that you could contact for information about their programs. Ask for guidance about selecting senior-year courses, and begin to consider which faculty members you will ask for letters of recommendation.

### **March            ► PLAN TO TAKE A TEST PREP COURSE                      ► BEGIN TO INVESTIGATE GRADUATE                      SCHOLARSHIP/FELLOWSHIP/GRANT OPPORTUNITIES**

- Finalize your plans for taking a test prep course. Most last 6-8 weeks, and it is highly advisable to take the exam immediately upon completion of the Prep course. Many prospective graduate students take the exams at the end of their junior year or over the summer, but many also take it in the fall semester of their senior year, preferably no later than October. If the schools to which you plan to apply also require subject exams, contact the Educational Testing Service for materials and sample exams, and consider purchasing prep books in that subject area. NOTE: In thinking about a timetable for taking admissions exams, you should leave enough time to take the exams a second time in case your first scores are not as high as they could be. Remember, however, that unless you cancel your scores immediately after taking the exam, admissions committees will see all of your scores, so do not treat the first one as "practice."
- Go to the Graduate Advisement Office or Office of Scholarships (or the equivalent) on your campus and investigate fellowship opportunities through private foundations and organizations, as well as federal and state agencies. Faculty members in your major may also know about fellowships in the field.

**April**      ► **BEGIN TO RESEARCH GRADUATE SCHOOLS/PROGRAMS**

- Begin to research the graduate schools you are considering. Learn about their admissions requirements, acceptance rates, strengths and weaknesses, and financial aid practices. Get course descriptions from the programs to which you may apply. Learn about the faculty: their publications, research, and scholarly reputations. If you are applying to doctoral programs, learn about specific faculty members in your anticipated area of specialization. Learn about research, teaching, and fellowship opportunities at the schools in which you are interested, as well as how their graduates fare on the job market. This will be a lengthy process, one that will continue into the fall, especially if you try to familiarize yourself with some of the faculty members' published work. It will be important to discuss in your personal essay (see October and November, below) your reasons for wanting to attend the specific school you are applying to, and being able to cite particular faculty members' research and publications, particularly when applying to doctoral programs, tells the admissions committee that you have done your homework in researching their program.

**Summer**      ► **FULFILL NECESSARY PRE-REQUISITES**  
                     ► **WORK AS AN INTERN OR RESEARCH ASSISTANT**  
                     ► **TAKE NECESSARY ADMISSIONS EXAM**

- Intern or work in some other capacity in your field. Take summer courses, as necessary, especially to complete pre-requisites for the programs in which you are interested. Continue to research the programs and faculty. Prepare for the necessary admissions exam(s) (if you haven't already done so).

**September**   ► **REQUEST APPLICATIONS**

- Finalize your list of schools. Contact each of them directly (phone, letter, or web site) to request application packages and to find out about application deadlines (especially for financial aid eligibility).

- NOTE: As you by now will realize, applying to graduate school is a time consuming process. You want to present the strongest possible application, so there is a lot riding on each element of the application (test scores, recommendations, the personal statement, and so on). Many students find it beneficial to take a year off after their senior year so that they can devote as much time as necessary to the application process. This is especially true for students who are carrying burdensome course loads and/or are working while going to school full time. Graduate schools do not generally look with disfavor at students who have been out of school for a year when they apply, and some actually prefer it, especially in those fields where practical, or at least related experience is one of the factors that graduate admissions committees consider. Talk to your advisor, and perhaps your graduate advisement office, about this possibility.

**October**      ► **FINALIZE LIST OF SCHOOLS**  
                     ► **REQUEST FACULTY RECOMMENDATIONS**  
                     ► **WORK ON PERSONAL STATEMENT**  
                     ► **CONTACT GRAD SCHOOLS TO ARRANGE CAMPUS VISIT**  
                     ► **TAKE ADMISSIONS EXAM IF YOU HAVE NOT YET DONE SO**

- Make sure you have received all applications that are available by now.
- Request faculty recommendations. Be sure to give them a deadline by which you need to submit your application (see November, below).
- Begin drafting your personal statement. This is a crucial part of your application, and it requires a good deal of time. Meet with your faculty advisor and those writing letters of recommendation to discuss this; go to your graduate advisement office for any material they may have on writing an effective personal essay; check to see if your campus writing center has any useful materials; and consult guidebooks on personal essay writing, especially ones that contain sample essays and step-by-step guidelines to the writing process. If there are workshops on your campus or in your area, you should consider taking one, especially if they offer one-to-one advising.
- Find out how long the registrar at your campus needs to process transcript requests, and plan accordingly.
- If possible (and practical), contact the schools to which you are applying to see if they have any events for prospective students (many have them in the spring semester to recruit applicants and/ or for accepted students). You may be able to sit in on a class and talk to both students and faculty members.
- It is essential that you take the necessary admissions exam(s) by now. This will give you time to take them again if that is necessary.

**November**    ► **FINISH PERSONAL STATEMENT**  
                   ► **REQUEST TRANSCRIPTS FROM REGISTRAR**  
                   ► **START SENDING OUT COMPLETED APPLICATIONS**

- You should try to finish your personal statement before the end of semester rush. Too many students put off writing the essay until just before the application deadline. Considering how important the essay is, you need to treat it as you would any important writing assignment.
- Request all necessary transcripts. Remember that if you have transferred schools, you will likely need transcripts from both.
- While many schools have application deadlines ranging from mid-January to the beginning of April, it is greatly to your advantage to submit your application as early as possible. Even when they don't announce the policy, many schools have rolling admissions, which means that if you wait until February or March to submit your application, there will be fewer spots available and you will be placed in the "all the rest" category. Submitting early also increases your chances of receiving financial aid, particularly in the form of fellowships, assistantships, and grants. Also, admissions committees simply have more time to devote to your application before they are inundated at the deadline. This can only work to your advantage.

**December**    ► **SEND OUT REMAINING APPLICATIONS**

- Try to send out all remaining applications, making sure that transcripts, test scores, and faculty recommendations are in place. Make sure that the registrar will send fall semester transcripts as soon as they are available.