

# Graduate School Preparation

You asked about graduate school and we have answers from the panel of graduate students at the 2013 Undergraduate Research Conference!

## Deciding if grad school is right for you

- What should I do to determine if graduate school is the right next step for me?
- What if I'm not sure if graduate school will get me the job I want?
- How difficult is graduate school?

## Applying / Admissions

- How difficult is it to enter a graduate program if I am not excelling academically?
- How early should you apply?
- What is the best way to ask someone for a recommendation?
- Should I choose a graduate school with a good reputation?
- Does it cost money to apply?

## Preparing for graduate school success now

- What do I need to do academically to best prepare for graduate school?
- Are you able to be financially independent as a graduate student?

## Preparing for graduate-level research

- How familiar do I need to be with a field of study before I apply to a program in that field?

## Succeeding while in graduate school

- Should I spend time fostering friendships with other graduate students?
- Should I only focus on completing my courses and the required work?

## Deciding if grad school is right for you

- What should I do to determine if graduate school is the right next step for me?

*Answer:* Ask your advisors and professors questions if you are unsure about going to grad school – they can give you valuable insight into what their day to day jobs are like. This can help you determine if that job seems right for you and if grad school is the logical next step.

- What if I'm not sure if graduate school will get me the job I want?

*Answer:* Talk to, intern with, or get a job doing something related to the job you ultimately want to do. For example, consider shadowing actual clinicians at their practices, hospitals, or institutions before you apply to medical school. This will help you determine if you like the job and if grad school is the logical next step toward achieving that job. You will also have the opportunity to develop a good enough rapport with the clinician you shadow – you can then ask them for a recommendation letter.

- How difficult is graduate school?

*Answer:* If you are worried about grad school being too difficult, know that anyone can master graduate work as long as you give it the necessary time and are passionate about the subject matter on which you choose to focus.

## Applying / Admissions

- How difficult is it to enter a graduate program if I am not excelling academically?

*Answer:* There are many ways to show you are a good grad school candidate even if your GPA is not great. The research questions you are interested in, the recommendation letters written for you, and your CV of experiences that directly relate to your interests are all important.

- How early should you apply?

*Answer:* Submit on time (half the battle) – early is even better because often times things go wrong with the application (recommendations get lost, missing a form, etc.).

- What is the best way to ask someone for a recommendation?

*Answer:* Make it as easy as possible for her/him to write the letter for you. Give them ample time and provide them with information about what to write.

- Should I choose a graduate school with a good reputation?

*Answer:* Submit application to schools that have faculty you want to work with – know what they research and make sure there is at least one, if not many, good matches between your research interests and theirs. Your grad school success and future success will not depend on the school's reputation, but the training you get from the faculty that are the best fit for you. If you can find a faculty member that matches your interests before you submit, contact her/him and get her/him excited about the prospect of working with you. Faculty make up most grad admissions boards, so you want this faculty member to be a champion for you on the admissions board. Chances are s/he will be one of the faculty deciding on your acceptance, so you want her/him to be an advocate there for you.

- Does it cost money to apply?

*Answer:* Most schools do have application fees, but some don't. Keep in mind that applying costs money - factor in application fees and travel costs for visiting the campuses for interviews.

### **Preparing for graduate school success now**

- What do I need to do academically to best prepare for graduate school?

*Answer:* Learn how to learn while you are still an undergraduate. You want to already be a skilled learner by the time you get to graduate school so that you can apply those skills when you get there.

- Are you able to be financially independent as a graduate student?

*Answer:* Concerned about money? Graduate school can be expensive, yes. But there are usually many different ways that you can pay for it. There are scholarships, work

opportunities, fellowships, and more. Typically a graduate program will offer you a package that includes tuition coverage, stipends, and other benefits that may include opportunities to do research and teach as you earn your degree.

### **Preparing for graduate-level research**

- How familiar do I need to be with a field of study before I apply to a program in that field?

*Answer:* Know the research topic you are interested in – have a good understanding of what questions have already been asked and answered and what questions have NOT been asked/answered. If you don't feel well-prepared, your lack of preparedness will show through in your application. Take time off to get to know the field better—take courses in the field, get a job as a research assistant to a professor in the field, shadow a clinician in the field, etc.

### **Succeeding while in graduate school**

- Should I spend time fostering friendships with other graduate students?

*Answer:* Focus on networking with other grad students, your peers – collaborate with them because they are the ones you will be working with in the future.

- Should I only focus on completing my courses and the required work?

*Answer:* No, you should also take time to present your work at conferences and publish your work.

*SOURCE: Adapted from Graduate School Preparation panel at Hunter's 2013 Undergraduate Research Conference*