

Graduate School Preparation Timeline

As an undergraduate preparing for graduate school, especially if you want a Ph.D., starting as early as possible to become aware of the nature of graduate school and the requirements for admission will help you to become a more competitive candidate.

The following sample timeline presents the recommended tasks to accomplish each year of your undergraduate program. However, your particular pathway may vary. If you haven't accomplished the tasks "on schedule" this does not mean that you will not be able to do graduate work, but only that your preparation will take a different, or perhaps longer, path. Talking with knowledgeable people in your field as soon as you begin to think about graduate work is always the best policy.

Most applications for graduate study are due between December and the end of January, but deadlines vary between programs, even within the same field. Make sure you know the deadlines and requirements for the particular programs for which you will be applying.

In general, most graduate applications require:

All undergraduate transcripts

Three letters of recommendation

The Graduate Records Exam – General Test or other standardized test scores

A personal statement and/or admissions essay(s)

A statement of purpose

Some programs require further application materials so, again, checking with the programs you are interested in is crucial. Ideally you should know this information before or during the beginning of your Junior year.

Freshman Year:

- Explore different fields of study and begin to hone in on a major and topics that interest you. Take advantage of the General Education program to try out different fields that you have not previously considered.
- Start strong in establishing a GPA – Seek tutoring or other support services and talk to your professors if you are not doing as well in a course as you would like. Evaluate your study skills and develop a set of study skills that works for you.
- Begin the practice of talking to your professors about things that interest you in their courses. If their field of study seems interesting to you, ask about careers and graduate study to see if this might be the field for you.
- Consider volunteering as a subject in a GVSU research study in the field that intrigues you.

Sophomore Year:

- Confirm original major as appropriate or declare new major that is appropriate for the field you wish to pursue.
- Continue to hone study skills and achieve strong grades
- Consider job shadowing in your field of interest
- Ask professors in your field and search the web to find out how to apply to graduate school, what materials, tests, etc. are required for application and what it takes to be a competitive graduate school applicant
- Determine if graduate study is really for you and if you have the academic skills and personal characteristics necessary to succeed in a graduate program
- Take relevant, meaningful classes that prepare you in your field and those that further develop the skills needed for graduate study. Plan on taking more challenging, upper-level courses and rigorous, but realistic, course loads across the next two years of your undergraduate program. Discuss appropriate courses with faculty advisor now and in your Junior year.
- Begin to explore topics in your chosen field that may hold particular interest for you.

- Become involved in the research, internship, and/or volunteer experiences and other extra-curricular activities that will make you a more competitive applicant.
- Consider joining a professional association relevant to your field as a student member, or at least visiting related web sites.

Junior Year:

- Become involved formally in research and/or other relevant experiences
- Plan Senior courses and appropriate experiences with faculty members
- Narrow down areas of interest within your field
- Develop a list of potential graduate programs – be sure you are looking at programs that have faculty with expertise/interest in your particular area(s) of interest
- Discuss choice of graduate programs with faculty members in your field, especially if they attended that program
- Gather information on registering and taking any required standardized tests
- Take a practice GRE (or other required test) to determine what and how much you need to study (Thanksgiving, Christmas or Spring breaks are good times to do this).
- Build a study plan for the GRE and begin to study on a regular basis
- Explore web sites and carefully check application procedures and all application materials needed for your target program. Don't forget to also check financial aid and fellowship application procedures/requirements (Can also do at the beginning of summer)
- Develop a timeline for your application tasks
- Discuss with advisors what you could do if you don't get into a graduate program
- Develop an appropriate "Plan B" (It helps to know that it won't be the end of the world if you don't get in)

Summer between Junior and Senior Years:

- Continue to study for the GRE
- Register for the GRE General Test and for the fall GRE Subject Test, if needed
- Get further Research experience or be involved in other relevant experiences
- Consider research or internship summer programs offered at other colleges, especially the ones you would prefer to attend
- Take the GRE General Test, if needed, near the end of your summer
- Obtain all necessary graduate school application forms
- Write Personal Statement and begin to polish
- Write Resume' – may need for applications, and is very helpful to give to recommenders

Senior Year:

Fall Semester:

- Continue Research studies
- Retake the GRE General Test, if needed
- Take the GRE Subject Test, if needed
- Ask one or two faculty members to critique your Personal Statement or other application essays
- Write Statement of Purpose, if needed
- Contact, in-person if possible, recommenders and arrange to get them any forms needed and determine a date by which they will need them. Don't forget they will need you to fill out a "Release of Information Form" (ask relevant department if they have their own forms; otherwise use the form on the GVSU Forms page).
- Send transcripts
- Send test scores, if appropriate
- Check to see if recommendations have been sent
- Complete all applications (Submitting early in the application cycle can be an advantage)
- Check to see if your applications at each school are complete

Winter Semester:

- Visit schools
- Breathe
- Negotiate financial aid packages
- Let schools you have chosen NOT to attend know
- April 15 is the final decision date for most schools
- Let recommenders and your undergraduate department know where you have decided to go!
- Celebrate your successes and don't let any rejections get you down (Nearly everybody gets rejected by some program!)