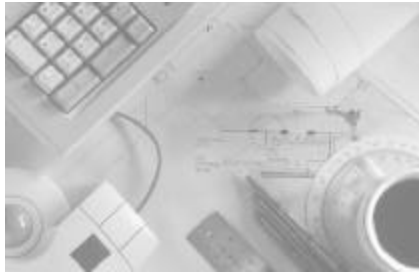


GRADUATE SCHOOL



- ◆ **Should I go?**
- ◆ **When to go?**
- ◆ **Where?**
- ◆ **Tests**
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SHOULD I GO?

There are two good reasons to go to graduate school: (1) sheer love of a subject that you cannot learn on your own or in individual courses; and/or (2) you know from talking with people in the field that interests you that you cannot enter/advance in it without a specific credential.

Think twice about applying if you are doing so based on any of the following assumptions:

“I won’t get a job with only a BA.” About 80% of each Smith class goes to work after graduation.

“All Smith women go to graduate school.” About 20% of any Smith graduating class goes directly on to further education or training, including night courses, certificate programs, and distance learning. However, many women who begin working right away undertake further study later on.

“I’ll earn more with a graduate degree.” This depends on whether you’re thinking about short- or long-term earning potential. In some fields, people with advanced degrees do earn more; however, while they’re working on their degrees they may have no income and may also be accumulating loans. Someone who begins work soon after graduation earns income right away, and can begin repaying her undergraduate loans. She also has the chance to explore career fields and therefore make a well-thought-out decision about what further study she actually needs.

“I don’t know what else to do.” Unlike undergraduate school, where you can choose courses in many fields and take them in a structured environment, graduate study is self-directed, focused, and specialized. Graduate departments expect their applicants to be clear about why they’re applying and what they want from their studies. For anyone not yet that focused, graduate study may be a waste of time and money. Perhaps for this reason the average age of graduate students has risen over the years in most fields. (In some fields, such as social work and business, applicants are generally expected to have experience before they apply.)

WHEN TO GO

Reasons to go now

1. The sooner you start, the sooner you finish!
2. You may have fewer personal commitments now than you’ll have later.
3. You may be interested in a field that’s changing quickly, so you need to keep up.
4. You want to maintain your academic momentum.

Reasons to go later

1. You need a rest from academia.
2. You need time to develop the purpose and focus to be a persuasive applicant.
3. Work experience will give you perspective on what training you need.
4. Experience may make you a stronger candidate for certain degree programs.
5. You want to establish legal/financial independence so you can apply for financial aid individually.
6. You’ve been working for a while, want to change careers, and need further training.

Reasons to go part-time

1. You may only need specific courses, rather than an entire degree program.
2. You may find it more convenient to use distance or on-line learning programs.
3. Your employer may help you pay for courses related to your work.

4. Working while studying will keep your loan level down.

WHERE TO GO

Gathering information

At least a year before you want to enter a degree program:

1. Talk with alumnae and others in fields you would like to enter, or at levels you would like to reach, about training they may have had after their BA. (Use the Alumnet to find Smith women who have attended relevant programs. http://www.smith.edu/cdo/services_products.html#alumnet Contact admissions offices to ask how you can reach Smith women currently enrolled in the program.) What do they think is required? Suggested? Useful? If they're very advanced in their field, ask them whether, if they were starting out now, they would train the same way again. If not, what would they do differently, and why? Do they anticipate any changes in the next few years which would affect the training you choose? (Use the CDO handout on Informational Interviewing.)
2. Look at the texts you read and the bibliographies of papers you wrote for your favorite courses. Whose work intrigues you? Are they academics and, if so, with which universities are they affiliated? If you come across individual scholars whose offerings particularly interest you, email them to ask whether, if you were admitted to their department, they would in fact be teaching during the time you would be in the program. It's also appropriate to ask for their suggestions about other programs in their specialty of which you might not already be aware.
3. Use print resources, such as Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study and its website (<http://petersons.com>) to review the full range of accredited institutions offering relevant degrees.
4. Take advantage of specific resources, such as the websites of the relevant professional associations, to gather information specific to your field. (These associations are sometimes listed under "organizations" when you research an academic field using a search engine such as Yahoo.)
5. Look at the relevant links on the CDO website: http://www.smith.edu/cdo/net_resources/grad.html
6. Ask professors in your field for their opinions. Which graduate programs do they think are good? Not so good? Why? Does the field have its own directory of graduate programs? (Examples: Graduate Study in Psychology; Guide to Graduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning, available in the CDO Library.)
7. Surf the homepages of individual graduate programs. Start with a few that interest you and use their information as a basis of comparison as you review more programs.

Making the final choices

Students and alumnae often ask, "What are the best schools in my field?" A more helpful question might be, "Which schools will allow me to meet my academic, personal, and professional goals?"

Remember, **you're choosing your home for the next year or more**. Give careful thought to such factors as: location, environment and climate; university and department size; cost; availability of loans, scholarships, assistantships; male/female faculty ratio; male/female student ratio; opportunities for cross-enrollment in other departments; availability of internships or apprenticeships (if relevant); placement (are graduates doing what you'd like to be doing when you finish the program?)

Once you've selected some schools, try to rank them (1) in order of their interest to you, and then again (2) in order of your likelihood of being admitted, based on their admissions standards and your academic record and experience. If you like, review your choices and rankings with an appropriate faculty member and/or the CDO (by phone or email if you're no longer at Smith).

If you can, visit the programs to which you would most like to be admitted. If you've already been in touch with a professor there, see if you can arrange to meet. Ask if you can talk to, or even go to class with, a graduate student in your field. Look at typical graduate student housing. If funding is a concern, make an ap-

pointment to meet with a financial aid officer. You're a "consumer" of an educational "product" and you have a right to know what you're getting!

TESTS

Most graduate programs require you to take a standardized test as part of the admission process. For programs leading to a PhD or Master's degree, you will probably be asked to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). This test is analogous to the SATs; some graduate programs also require a subject test. (www.gre.org) Some graduate programs, particularly those in education and human services, offer you the alternative of taking the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) <http://www.tpcweb.com/mat/mat2001/index.html>. Application information is also available at the CDO.

It's best to **take the necessary exam(s) at least a year before** you plan to enter graduate school. The registration packets normally contain sample questions, and you can also use preparation books or CD-ROMs, or attend a preparation course. **How you prepare** depends on your level of self-discipline, the time you have available, your budget, and how much preparation you feel you need.

It's wise to **plan on taking the test only once**, for both psychological and practical reasons. If you take it a second time, the graduate programs are likely to average your scores; there would have to be an enormous improvement in the second score for it to have any impact on your record. In addition, if you go into the exam planning on taking it again, you might not give it your "best shot." (If you know you've done poorly as you finish the test, you can usually cancel your score.)

APPLYING

Putting together the jigsaw puzzle.

Your application will be composed of several pieces: transcript; scores; references (= recommendations); an application form; a personal statement; and sometimes a writing sample or portfolio. Graduate schools vary in the weight they give to each of these items, although PhD and Master's programs tend to be particularly interested in what you've taken in the relevant field, how you've performed, how much potential your referees feel you have for graduate-level work, how clear about your academic goals you are in your personal statement, and, in the case of the arts, your portfolio.

Test Scores

Each examination's information packet includes instructions on submitting your scores to the institutions you've chosen.

References

Please read <http://www.smith.edu/cdo/handouts/references.html> for instructions on using your CDO credentials file, and for handling graduate school reference forms. **If you will be applying to graduate school after you leave Smith**, ask at least three faculty members to place a reference on file at the CDO, in case they are not available to write one at the time you actually use it. Many faculty members are happy to revise the general reference later, when your study plans have become more focused. (You are also welcome to add employer references to your CDO file.)

To be effective, your references should demonstrate enthusiasm about you as a student and as a potential graduate student. It's helpful to **"educate" your referees**; give each of them a copy of your resume and a draft of your personal statement, as well as a brief summary of your graduate school plans and the related aspects of your background that might need emphasizing in the reference. If it's been a while since certain

referees taught you, remind them of the course you took, your paper and your grade.

Referees may also be willing to address issues that would be hard for you to handle without sounding defensive, such as a “bad” semester, an unexpectedly low grade, an academic record that began poorly but steadily improved, or an apparent contradiction between your test scores and your GPA.

Transcripts

You will need to request official transcripts from the Registrar of every institution mentioned on your Smith transcript. To order your Smith transcript go to: <http://www.smith.edu/registrar/request.html>.

Personal Statement

Most graduate programs will ask you for a “personal statement,” essentially an informal letter to the admissions committee; it is, of course, also a sample of your writing, attention to detail, and logic. Questions are usually variations on: Why our school/program? What has prepared you for it? Why now in your life?

Graduate schools have several reasons for giving you a chance to “speak” to them through a personal statement. They already have plenty of concrete information about you. What they don’t know and cannot find out from your transcript and other documents is why you’re applying for this particular program, where it fits in your ideas about your future, what you bring to the department as a person and scholar, and what you hope to take away when you graduate.

Start by listing the pieces of information you want to convey; then move the items around until they flow in a logical, often chronological, way. (If you have trouble coming up with an outline, talk it through first with friends or a CDO counselor, and have them write down the main themes they hear.) Then elaborate on each item briefly, using the first person active voice (“I”) as much as possible, as well as a simple, direct style.

This is not an academic essay; avoid long or formal words or phrases unless they are the only ones that will precisely express your thoughts. Admission committees read hundreds of essays each year; they’re delighted when an applicant addresses them as human beings and gives them a clear picture of her readiness for, and awareness of, their field, program, and expectations. It’s appropriate to mention courses you’re looking forward to taking, and professors with whom you’d like to study, if that will help your readers understand your interests. You’re welcome to bring in your draft for CDO Drop In or send it as an attachment to cdo@smith.edu for review.

Many graduate school application forms are now on-line; a typewriter is available at the CDO.

Financial Aid

Be sure to **check the financial aid guidelines** for each program to which you are applying; occasionally the financial aid deadline is different from the application deadline. One consideration in choosing your program will be whether the department offers financial aid or assistantships to all qualified graduate students, or only to PhD candidates.

Interviews

Some programs, at least at the PhD level, will ask you to come for an interview (which may include several sessions) with faculty members in your field and current students. They’re an opportunity for the department to get to know you; they’re also a chance for you to ask questions and form some impressions about whether the department is a good “fit” for you. (The CDO staff is glad to prepare you for interviews, by phone or in person. Some alumnae prefer to prepare a list of questions they’re concerned about and a description of the kind of interviewer they find difficult, and send them to cdo@smith.edu before their appointment. The CDO handout on interviewing may also be useful. <http://www.smith.edu/cdo/handouts>.)

Success!

Please let the CDO know how everything turns out for you, and send in your tips for Smith women applying to graduate school in the future. **Good luck!**