

BEST SOURCES TO LEARN ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Professors

This is your best source. Professors know you, they know which programs favor students from your school, they know the relative quality of graduate programs in their fields, and they may even have personal friends at graduate programs where you might like to apply.

Other Students and Alumni

Students and alumni have similar information. Alumni currently at graduate programs will give you the most honest information about the quality of the program and the faculty.

GradTrek.com and Peterson's Guides, in abbreviated form at www.petersons.com

Gradtrek.com is in beta testing right now. Check it out. It's a search engine driven program to find the right grad program. Peterson's guides have every accredited program in the United States. They're a little dense and boring, but if you want to learn about programs there's no other complete resource.

Specialty Guides

Find specialty guides for your field, for example, *Graduate Programs in Neurosciences*, by asking professors for reference to them, by using the subject search engine at amazon.com, or by using the subject search engine for *Books in Print*, available from your university bookstore. Some associations also print guides to grad programs.

Academic Journals in Your Field

Top students should get grad school ideas directly from the academic journals. The best programs generate the best and the most articles, so look in the journals for writing and/or research that interest you. Then find out where the article writer teaches.

National Research Council data on Doctoral Programs (2011 release of 2005 data)

This study was highly controversial in terms of methodology, and the authors disavowed themselves of their own data, but released them anyway. Then, in spite of the fact that NRC said the data could not be used to create ordinal rankings, phds.org did so anyway. I think it is better than the alternatives, and a decent place to start building a list. See phds.org or a related data product, *A Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States*.

Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index (FSPI)

No longer in use.

Educational Rankings Annual

An occasionally released compendium of other rankings, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Just as an interesting trivia item, it does not come out annually.

The University of Illinois Library – Grad School Rankings Page

<http://www.library.illinois.edu/edx/rankings/rankgrad.html>

The Business Magazine Rankings

Business magazines are in the business of selling business magazines. Their editors usually know less about higher education than they know about automobiles, which is not a lot. These "rankings" are not precise, but you can get ideas to investigate further. US News & World Report is the most widely cited ranking system, but is known to have a flawed methodology.

Online Searches

Online data are voluminous but shallow, and can be downright misleading (for example, some portals list schools in order of having paid a subscription fee). Always go online to investigate schools you're already interested in. Also, watch carefully for information on related labs and institutes, which might interest you more than the main department.

Grad Fairs

One of the only places to meet a lot of graduate professionals quickly, but don't fall in love on the first date! Check out other schools.

Writing Exercises

for the

Graduate Admissions Essay, Statement of Purpose, or Letter of Intent

Answer each question with a narrative essay of any length, from a paragraph to several pages, whatever feels right.

1. How did you first get interested in this field of study? Can you remember the very first time you had this interest?
2. What has influenced this interest over time? What professors, classes, labs, papers, research projects, books or ideas have influenced you? What out-of-class experiences have influenced you?
3. If your interest has changed over time, how has your prior interest contributed to your understanding of/approach to your current interest?
4. Make a list of all your undergraduate papers, labs, and research projects. If you cannot remember their exact names, approximate or paraphrase.
5. Do you have any publications or presentations at academic conferences? Are there publications you can submit or any academic conferences you can attend (in any capacity) between now and when you would begin your graduate studies?
6. What will you do between now and when you will arrive at your graduate institution? Which classes will you take? What skills will you acquire? What internship, work or community service experiences will you complete?
7. How have you researched your graduate school options to date? Have you visited schools, researched them on Web sites, written to professors, attended conferences?
8. Can you remember encouraging words you have received from professors, employers, coaches, or peers? If others have encouraged you to pursue your goals, can you remember, as exactly as you can, what they said to you? If so, make a list of quotes.
9. What is your GPA in the following categories: overall, year by year, over the last four completed semesters, in your major, since you declared your current major, in math and sciences, not counting math and sciences, not counting semesters abroad, etc.? Look at your transcripts and see if there are other ways of analyzing your GPA that might be of interest to admissions readers.
10. How have you prepared yourself for success in graduate school? What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you? What study or laboratory skills will help you succeed? What personal attributes will help you?
11. Have you overcome adversity to get where you are? (Be brief.)
12. What makes you unique or unusual? List several things.
13. What are your leisure activities? What do you do when you are not being a student? What do you do to relieve stress?
14. How might you contribute to the academic community you intend to join? How will that community be benefited by association with you?
15. Can you name specific professors of interest at your top three graduate programs? If so, list them along with their research/academic specialties.
16. What will you do with this degree? Will you teach, do research, work in industry or government? All of the above? (If you don't know, don't invent.)