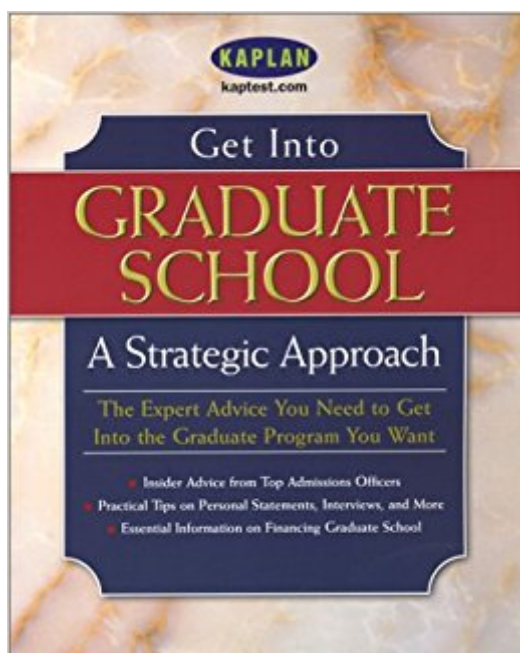


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# Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach



## Synopsis

Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach Choosing and getting into the right school is crucial to getting the most out of your graduate school years -- and your future career. We're here to help. Kaplan has brought together some of the nation's top admissions experts to create this exclusive guide to getting into grad school. This informative resource includes: Advice from top admissions officers on writing persuasive personal statements, obtaining the best recommendations, preparing your application, and more. Expert guidance on financing grad school, including tips on financial aid, borrowing, and managing expenses. Specialized information for every student, including minority students, older students, people with disabilities, and international students. Key resources for grad school applicants, including websites, professional associations, and more. Finding the Right Program for You Paying for Grad School Becoming a Standout Applicant Application DOs and DON'Ts The Role of the GRE Visit [kaptest.com](http://kaptest.com) Kaptest.com is your one-stop resource for getting into graduate school. At every click you'll find the latest information on the admissions process, plus candid articles on life in graduate school, insightful school profiles, study aids, practice materials, and much more. Visit [kaptest.com](http://kaptest.com) today and get a head start on the rest of your life. Sign up for the Graduate School Edge Tap into Kaplan's expertise with the Graduate School Edge, our free email newsletter. Filled with admissions tips, the latest test and career news, important deadline reminders, study aids, and more, the Graduate School Edge is an excellent resource for critical graduate school admissions information. Sign up today at [kaptest.com](http://kaptest.com)

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## Customer Reviews

Chapter 1: Assessing your Goals You've probably heard the good news: A person with a master's degree can earn around \$500,000 more over their lifetime than a person with a bachelor's degree, and earnings increase by about \$1,000,000 for each additional degree, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Maybe that's one reason there are more people than ever in the United States applying to grad school. But while the rewards of advanced study can be greater fulfillment and a higher salary, the competition of getting into a good graduate school is fierce. There are many people out there thinking about going to graduate school. Meanwhile, the variety of graduate programs offered by graduate institutions is also growing. And the cost of education continues to rise. That's why, now more than ever, deciding to go to grad school means you have to realistically assess what graduate school will do for you, and exactly what program will suit you best. **WHY SHOULD YOU GO?** If graduate school is so much like work, and if the degree doesn't guarantee you the career of your dreams, why did over a million people enter U.S. graduate programs last year? Despite the difficulties, there are still compelling reasons to get a graduate degree. **A Career in Academia** To teach at two-year colleges, you'll need at least a master's degree; to teach and do research at four-year colleges, universities, and graduate programs, you'll need a doctorate. **Professional Licensing** Social workers, psychologists, therapists, and others who directly treat or counsel clients will almost certainly need graduate education to meet national and state licensing requirements. The proper licensing and credentials are essential not only for employment reasons, but also for insurance reimbursement. There are many insurance carriers that authorize payment only to practitioners who meet certain educational and licensing standards. **Career Change** Many people make the decision to return to graduate school after working in "the real world" for a while. Their interests and abilities have developed over the years and may have nothing at all to do with their undergraduate education. A graduate degree is necessary training for the new field. **The Switch from Practitioner to Administrator** After working in the trenches for a while, and developing a strong sense of how an organization, school, clinic, or department could be better run, you may be interested in moving up to the management level of your field. This may also require some graduate education. **Career and/or Salary Advancement** The upper levels of your field may be closed to people with only a bachelor's degree, no matter how talented or industrious you are. Because the

**Job Market is Lousy** A slow economy is a popular reason for going directly from undergraduate to graduate school. The reasoning is: Since I'm not going to get a job anyway, I might as well go to grad school now. Maybe I can ride out the job scarcity and even come out more employable than when I went in.

**Because You Love It** There are plenty of people who choose graduate school because they simply love the field or because graduate school provides welcome intellectual stimulation.

**Making Your Investment Pay Off** Should you go to graduate school? The simple fact that you are reading this book indicates that you have already given this question some thought and are considering pursuing either a master's or a doctorate. But it's a question worth considering in some detail. First, even a master's degree is a significant investment of time, money, and work. Most master's programs take two academic years to complete; at a private institution, the cost can run over \$30,000 a year in tuition alone. A doctorate generally takes a minimum of four years, and while true financial aid is more available at the doctoral than at the master's level, the financial strain is significant. Even if you are willing to take on loan debt to finance your degree, you may be looking at 20 or 30 years of loan payments. Then there is the job market. In many fields, jobs in academia are hard to come by; in some industries and businesses, even an advanced degree is no guarantee of a dream job. The bottom line is that graduate school is a huge investment. Before you take the leap, it's key that you have a pretty clear idea where your interests really lie, what grad school life is like, and whether you are compatible with a particular program and its professors. Armed with this information, you should be able to successfully apply to the right programs, get accepted, and use your graduate school time to help you get a head start on the postgraduation job search.

**Real Students: Grad School Life** What your experience of graduate school is like depends a lot on the school you attend, your particular program, what you're expecting from the experience, and issues in your personal life. Here are a handful of current and recent graduate students' impressions:

**Ups and Downs** "Graduate school is an emotional roller-coaster. There are times when you feel really bad about it and there are times when you feel really great."

**Hard Day's Night** "I worked full time and went to school full time for a year, and I remember crying every day when I came home. Then the next morning it was all fine, and I got up and went to work again."

**Doing it by Yourself** "If you are going to graduate school expecting to be taught, you're in for a rude surprise. Basically, for most of the substantial courses, they just hand you a reading list and tell you to go learn it yourself."

**Brainpower** "You're at the point where if you're thinking, you're dealing with the same questions as the professors are. Your breadth of knowledge and reading in the field is certainly less, but you are not necessarily less capable of answering the same questions that they are engaged in."

**Power Plays** "Undergraduates are paying a lot of tuition, and it gives them a lot of power in the university."

Grad students who are on fellowships or TA or whatever -- you take what you can get. You really don't have much power." Feels Like... "It seems like you go to graduate school with a whole different set of ideas from when you leave. Your goals and motivations constantly change. This is almost like a job for me -- it feels like a job instead of school." Getting Wise "A lot of my fellow students complain about politics -- a lot of gossip and competitiveness. This program was an honor to get into, and now I realize that it's not going to be a breeze to get through; so in this sense I have to harden myself to the politics, which could make things harder for me." Making a Difference "For my field placement I worked with high school students with disabilities. I was doing career, personal, and academic counseling. The first part involved working with students who had serious physical handicaps. I helped empower them -- assisted many of them up to the time of their graduation. I got a lot of personal satisfaction from this as I saw my investments pay off. Watching them grow was really great."

### THE BASICS Master's vs. Doctoral Programs

Broadly speaking, the two most common grad school degrees awarded are master's and doctorates. Depending on your area of interest and your professional goals, one or the other may be the goal you pursue.

#### Master's Programs: Two Tracks

Master's programs are two years long, and master's students generally are one of two types: those on the academic track, where the degree programs focus on classical research and scholarship, and those on the practical track, where the degree program is actually a professional training program that qualifies them to enter or advance in a field such as social work or education. At the master's level, the operative word is probably pressure. Since master's programs generally give very little financial aid, many master's students work at least part time and attend classes either part or full time. Juggling priorities is one of the first skills a master's student needs to develop. There is usually quite a bit more assigned reading than in undergraduate school. Once you get past the introductory or foundation courses, you're usually evaluated on the basis of your papers and your in-class or practical work. You'll be expected to maintain at least a B average, and will need considerably higher grades if you plan to move on to a doctoral program. If you're on an academic track, you'll almost certainly write a thesis, a 50- to 150-page paper demonstrating your grasp of scholarship and research in your field, before you are graduated. If you're on the practical track, fieldwork or additional coursework will take the place of the thesis. And in many programs, you'll be managing the whole thing more or less on your own. While on the practical track, advisers tend to be more involved, evaluating your fieldwork as well as approving your course selection and other academic matters; on the academic track, master's students tend to take a back seat to the doctoral students.

#### Doctoral Programs: Apprenticeships

A doctoral program is an entirely different world. Doctoral programs are designed to create scholars capable of independent

research that will add new and significant knowledge in their fields. From the first, you will be regarded as an apprentice in your field. Your first year or two in the program will be spent on coursework, followed by "field" or "qualifying" exams. Once you've passed those exams, demonstrating that you have the basic factual and theoretical knowledge of your field down cold, you will then be permitted to move on to independent research, in the form of your doctoral dissertation. During most of this time you can get financial aid in the form of teaching or research assistantships; in exchange for assisting professors in the classroom or the lab, you get a small stipend and/or tuition remission. Doctoral programs see themselves as one of the most, if not the most, rigorous professional training programs.

**Your Adviser** The person responsible for overseeing your transformation from apprentice to professional is your adviser, and the person responsible for finding the right adviser is you. You will choose your adviser no later than the end of your first year in the program. This person will be your mentor, working closely with you not only on your academic progress, but most likely employing you as a research or teaching assistant, helping you shape your dissertation proposal, steering you through the writing and defense of your dissertation, and, you hope, recommending you for jobs when you have your degree. To put it quite bluntly, your relationship with your adviser will make or break your program.

**Politics, Politics** You'll need to maintain working relationships with other professors as well, since you might need a committee of up to five faculty members to review your dissertation. In fact, you'll discover that graduate departments are quite political, and a strong adviser can help you negotiate many difficulties. The relationship with your adviser is so crucial to success in a doctoral program that as we discuss school selection and admissions, we'll constantly show you how to get a head start on the adviser selection process and what an influential role it plays in choosing a doctoral program.

**Research vs. Teaching** Over the last couple of decades, "publish or perish" has been the dominant way of life in academia. Even more important than teaching has been research and publication, to the point where the conventional wisdom among grad students became, "Don't think about teaching; publish. If you're not a star in the first five years, you can kiss your career good-bye, and you're not going to become a star teaching all the classes that the senior faculty doesn't want." While this has a kernel of truth, it does paint a picture that is somewhat bleaker than reality. Teaching experience is solid work experience, and may ultimately contribute to your getting a job, both in and outside academe.

**What Degree Do You Need?** What degree you need basically depends on what kind of job you want to get. If you want to join academia and teach or research at the university level, you will need a doctorate, no matter what field you're in. It's also virtually impossible to work as a clinical or research psychologist without the doctorate. If you're considering social work, health care,

education, or engineering, the master's degree usually provides the professional qualifications you need to move past the entry-level jobs. If you want to make more money, the choice largely depends on your field. In industry, science Ph.D.'s can make significantly higher salaries than those who hold only master's degrees; in English, on the other hand, a Ph.D. mostly qualifies you for university teaching, and these jobs are so scarce that many new Ph.D.'s cannot find work. The alternative is usually work in publishing or related fields, which are not always the most lucrative professions either.

**Real Students: Advice from the Trenches** We asked graduate students what advice they would give to someone considering graduate school. Here are their Top 10 pointers:

1. Know why you're going, otherwise you'll flounder.
2. Focus your study as quickly as you can. It will simplify your research and decrease your time in the program.
3. Get to know the professors in the programs that interest you. It's the quickest way to get a TA or RA.
4. Investigate departments in terms of the student success rate.
5. Think for yourself.
6. Read as much in your field as possible.
7. Learn how to sell yourself in a substantial, credible way.
8. Know the history of your field and the basic theories. It's dull but invaluable.
9. Don't do it if money is your main motivation.
10. Make sure you're devoted -- it's a long haul.

**MASTER'S DEGREES** There are two kinds of master's degrees: those awarded on the way to the doctorate, and those designated "terminal." This rather ominous title simply means that getting this degree does not automatically launch you into a Ph.D. program. In some fields, this is because the master's degree is considered the "terminal professional degree" -- that is, the master's provides the knowledge and training you need to join a profession. As a rule, the Ph.D. in these fields is reserved for those who want to teach rather than practice. In other fields, the master's degree is preliminary to the doctorate, and master's degree holders usually cannot expect to advance professionally or financially as far as doctorate holders can. Terminal master's degree programs are usually a lot like undergraduate school, only this time it's the program and not your parents that expects you to maintain at least a "B" average. Academic programs focus on coursework, research, and papers; many require a thesis for graduation. Programs in social work and education also have a practical dimension, requiring candidates to work in classrooms, clinics, and other professional settings. Most programs are two or three years long, although completing the thesis can stretch that out an extra year or two. Master's degrees are generally seen one of three ways. First, as "practical" degrees: they provide professional training or advancement. Second, as "entry" degrees: people may choose to get a master's first to make getting into a doctoral program more likely, with a stellar master's performance. Third, as the "consolation prize" awarded to those who are not admitted to Ph.D. programs.

**Variations on a Theme** In the humanities and social sciences especially, there are some interesting variations on the traditional M.A. or M.S.

Cooperative and dual- or joint-degree programs An increasing number of graduate schools offer cooperative programs and joint- or dual-degree programs. In cooperative programs, you apply to, answer to, and graduate from one school, but you have access to classes, professors, and facilities at a cooperating school as part of the program. In some cases faculty from the cooperating school may even sit on your thesis committee. When you graduate, you receive one degree, from the school offering the program. In joint- or dual-degree programs you work towards two degrees simultaneously, either within the same school or at two neighboring schools. You may be registered at two schools and be subject to two sets of graduation requirements. These programs are generally less expensive and quicker than earning the two degrees separately, because at least some of the coursework, research, or clinical or field work is applied to both sets of degree requirements simultaneously.

Interdisciplinary Programs This type of program is generally run by a faculty committee from a number of different departments. You apply to, register with, and are graduated by only one of the departments; for example, in an interdisciplinary program in women's studies, you would apply to the sociology department and graduate with a M.S. in sociology. But the program you actually follow is designed and administered by the interdepartmental faculty group, and you.

DOCTORAL DEGREES There are two basic ways to enter into the doctorate system. One is to get a terminal master's degree and reapply to Ph.D. programs; the other is to go directly to the doctoral program.

Starting with a Terminal Master's This has good points and bad points. The terminal master's gives you flexibility. If you are not happy with the school or the faculty, or if your interests shift over the course of earning your degree, you have the freedom to change schools and programs, no questions asked. The terminal master's can also give you a taste of your chosen field and of graduate school life before you commit yourself to the doctorate. If you decide against the doctorate, you graduate, not quit. The terminal master's can also be a way into doctoral programs that might not accept you on the basis of your undergraduate record. This works better in some fields and programs than others; before you decide on this course, check with doctoral programs that interest you to be sure that master's grades are seriously considered in the admissions process. On the other hand, continuing for the doctorate means reliving the application process, sometimes even retaking the GRE, and pulling up stakes both academically and personally if you decide on a different school. Starting in a terminal master's program will probably cost more. Master's students generally receive less financial aid than do doctoral students, and completing a master's degree followed by a doctoral program will probably take longer than earning the master's on the way to a doctorate. Some Ph.D. programs will give you advanced placement if you have already earned your master's, but the total time and cost will probably be greater than if you earn



your master's on the way to the Ph.D. **Going Directly for the Doctorate** In many Ph.D. programs, there is no terminal master's degree; the master's is simply the first stage of Ph.D. completion. A specified amount of coursework is followed by a thesis and qualifying examinations. The master's is awarded after "satisfactory completion" of these requirements. Though many students who enter doctoral programs continue on to get their degrees, admission to this type of program is no guarantee that you will actually go on to earn the Ph.D. Consider this typical warning from one prestigious university's sociology department: "The department retains the right to award a terminal master's degree to students whose performance on the preliminary examination or on the A.M. research paper gives insufficient promise of success in the doctoral program." Meaning that after this initial phase, you can be asked to leave the program if, in the opinion of the department, you are not the stuff of which Ph.D.'s are made. The master's degree is a sort of consolation prize (if you have met the requirements). Ph.D. candidacy is not a given; it must be earned. In most programs in humanities and social sciences, for example, those who successfully clear this first hurdle have to meet other requirements, including: Approval of the dissertation proposal Demonstration of foreign language proficiency Completion of coursework, qualifying or field examinations, and practical/field training Approval by your department as "competent to write the dissertation"

**PART-TIME VS. FULL-TIME STUDY** Although there are many factors to consider before deciding how much time you can allot to graduate study, the decision itself is usually obvious to most people. A single mother with a career job and children, for example, will probably not have enough hours in each day to pursue a full-time graduate program. Likewise, there's no compelling reason why a freshly graduated B.A. who has the financial resources and the time to devote to full-time study would choose a part-time program. Most graduate schools offer some flexibility in how long you may take to complete your degree.

**Part-time Programs** If you will have to work while you are in school, particularly while you're in the course-work stage of your studies, see if part-time study is an option of the program you're considering. These programs typically involve the completion of six to nine credits per semester. They are ideal for people who have already begun their careers and who would like to continue gaining professional experience while earning the degree that will allow them to move on to the next level. While part-time study sometimes costs more in the long run, the lower tuition per semester and the free time to pursue other interests and responsibilities are the main incentive in these programs. This can make all the difference in the course-work years, where carrying two classes per semester instead of four can make balancing work and study possible. Most part-time students take two to three years to earn their master's, and have been known to take several more to reach their doctorates. Part-time programs are slow, however, which can be

discouraging, especially when licensure or salary increases are at stake. Are there night or weekend classes? When is the library open? The lab? Talk to students who are currently in the program, especially those who work. Professors can be intolerant of working students' limited study time and work obligations (especially when that means missing class). If you are in a master's program for specific training or job advancement, this may be annoying but will cause no permanent damage to your career. If you plan to apply to a doctoral program, though, in which relationships with professors are more crucial to your progress and success, the burden of pleasing a boss and an adviser at the same time may be unmanageable.

### Full-Time Programs

Although many students in full-time graduate programs support themselves with part-time work, their primary allegiance is to the graduate degree. It will become the focus of your life, but if there is any way that you can manage full-time, or nearly full-time, studies at the higher levels, do it. You can graduate quicker and start picking up the financial pieces that much sooner -- and often with a more secure base for your job search in the form of good support from your adviser.

### Nondegree or Nonmatriculated Programs

Want to go to graduate school without really applying? Some programs offer nondegree or nonmatriculated status, meaning that you apply, pay tuition, register for classes, stay up all night writing papers, and generally do everything that "matriculated" students do -- except earn a master's or doctorate. Why do schools have this option, and who would put herself through it when there's no degree at the end? A nondegree program might be for you if you are not quite sure what degree you do want to pursue, or if you have been out of school for a long time and want to get back into the academic world. It also can be appealing if you're a professional who wants a bit of additional graduate education without the burden of a full graduate program. If you're not accepted into a degree program, can you get into a graduate school this way? Possibly. According to one grad school admissions officer, it pays to honestly ask the admissions office if taking classes gives you an edge.

### KNOW THYSELF

The first step in the graduate school selection process is to take an objective look at yourself as a candidate. You may hate this step because it forces you to look at your weaknesses as well as your strengths; however, bear in mind that nearly every graduate school applicant has at least one major weakness in her application. A common one is an undergraduate GPA that doesn't reflect your ability; another is lack of background knowledge or experience in the field you hope to enter. And although it's possible for you, the applicant, to rationalize that mediocre GPA, you can be sure that the admissions committee won't. A much better strategy is to make an honest evaluation of your candidacy, then create your application in a way that convinces the admissions committee that your weaknesses are irrelevant and that your strengths, as demonstrated on your application, make you such a great asset to the department that

they can't possibly turn you down. Copyright © 2003 by Kaplan, Inc.

This book is a general guide to the graduate admission process. It does not give you any edge besides telling you what is the procedure to apply to graduate school. It gives you many common sense recommendations aimed at preventing you from choosing your school, or applying to your schools at the last minute... Common sense advices on the graduate admissions procedure. You could independently derive many of the recommendations featured in this guide by thinking methodically and reading the admissions page of Average University. That being said, if you have no clue on the graduate admissions process, this book is for you !

This book is a waste of money at any price. It is not only outdated, there is nothing in the book that isn't patently obvious. I donated it to a book drop. Maybe the paper can be recycled.

This book goes into detail about all the elements of Grad school entry - it is so good that it even includes sections specific to 1.) Your racial background (Incl. special African American Applicant section) 2.) Your immigration status (International student applicants). I definitely thought it was a worthwhile purchase!

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