

*Human Development and Family Science  
North Dakota State University  
Information About Graduate School Applications*

*Thinking Ahead—Helpful Steps During Your Undergraduate Years*

The sooner you start thinking about graduate school as a possibility, the better prepared you'll be if you do decide to apply. Ideally you will start thinking about these issues at some point during your sophomore year. That will give you plenty of time to participate in activities and acquire information that will help you to be successful. Listed below are some of the steps that can help you to better prepare for the graduate school application process and for graduate school itself. Keep in mind that there will be some variability in the types of undergrad experiences that will best prepare you—programs in different areas make different demands on students. However, the activities that are listed here are seen as generally helpful by many faculty members and current graduate students.

**Investigate your options:** Think about the kinds of jobs you might like; talk to professors. Talk to people who do those jobs and find out what their typical day is like, what they like about their jobs, what kind of degree and/or experiences they had, etc.

Investigate the degrees that would allow you to do the type of job you think you want. If you get that degree, what other options does it give you? What schools offer those degrees? Investigate them. What are their strengths and weaknesses? The internet is now a big source of information about particular schools. In addition, your professors might know people at different institutions you are interested in.

Read books about preparing for graduate school—there are many excellent resources out there.

Once you have identified schools you are interested in (either before or after you apply), it might be a good idea to visit them. You can ask to visit with professors (esp. professors whose research interests you), as well as current graduate students. This can allow you to get a sense of whether the program is right for you.

**Coursework:** Plot out courses that will help you be successful in graduate school and in your chosen field (e.g. research methods, statistics, communications, English (writing)). Also, make sure you keep your grades up. Many programs have minimum GPA's for acceptance.

**Research:** Get involved in research. There are several ways to be involved in research. One is to get involved in a study a faculty member is doing or plans on doing. Students often choose to do this as part of their Field Experience hours. Another is to arrange to complete a senior thesis project (in our department, this can serve as the Capstone). Getting involved in research is one of the best ways to prepare for certain types of graduate programs and can give you a “head start” once you are in graduate school. A study by Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, & Hansen (2002) showed that in a national survey of graduate students in masters and doctoral programs in psychology—participation in research as an undergraduate was one of the two most important factors related to how well-prepared students felt for graduate school.

You might also take advantage of the chance to attend, or even present at, local, regional and national professional conferences in your discipline.

There are some sources of financial assistance to help undergraduate students get involved in research. These can range from undergraduate fellowships to programs such as McNair, which provides eligible students with structure and a stipend.

**Volunteer:** Get volunteer experience someplace that is related to what you would like to do (e.g., a human service agency, a school, a hospital, guest lecture in a class, undergraduate clubs etc.). It is hard to know if you really are interested in a career unless you “try it out”.

**Teaching experience:** This can be both formal and informal. Some departments have undergraduate teaching assistants. Professors might let motivated advanced students guest lecture in a class. Take advantage of the chance to put together a workshop presentation (e.g. NDSU hosts Expanding Your Horizons every spring. EYH is a set of hands-on workshops for junior high girls to expose them to careers in math and science. Many faculty and graduate students who present would welcome assistance.

**Develop relationships with faculty/Find a mentor:** There are a number of reasons this is a good idea. First, you will need letters of recommendation for your graduate school applications. Second, faculty members sometimes hear about interesting opportunities for students. Third, having a faculty member as a mentor

has been related to how well prepared students felt for graduate school (Huss et al., 2002). One excellent way to do this is by getting involved in a faculty member's research. Another is to share your interest in graduate school with faculty in a closely related area and ask for suggestions about things you can read, etc. Most faculty are more than happy to offer this kind of assistance to motivated students.

**Be prepared for the expense:** Applying for graduate school can be expensive. There are a number of factors that impact the expense, including the number of schools you apply to, their distance, and the type of programs. Fees are involved for standardized exams required by many programs (e.g. GRE's, LSAT's). All universities will have application fees to cover their processing expenses. There will be postage for your application as well as letters of recommendation. You might need to travel to an interview, especially if you are applying to clinically-oriented programs (expenses related to this include travel, meals, professional clothing).

**Know the deadlines:** You need to plan ahead for required standardized exams (allowing yourself time to take them twice if necessary). In addition, you have to allow your letter writers sufficient time to write and mail their letters (also accounting for university holidays). While some programs will accept late applications, many will not.

**Know about funding potentials:** Graduate study can be expensive—both tuition/fees/books/copying and supporting oneself while a graduate student. Investigate funding alternatives and make sure to submit any extra applications that may be required for these.

**Family & personal relationship preparedness:** Make sure to share information about what graduate school will be like and the demands on your time with important people in your life. Having their support and encouragement can be a big help!

## References

- Huss, M. T., Randall, B. A., Patry, M., Davis, S. F., & Hansen, D. J. (2002). Factors influencing self-rated preparedness for graduate school: A survey of graduate students. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29, 275-281.