

Preparing for Graduate School



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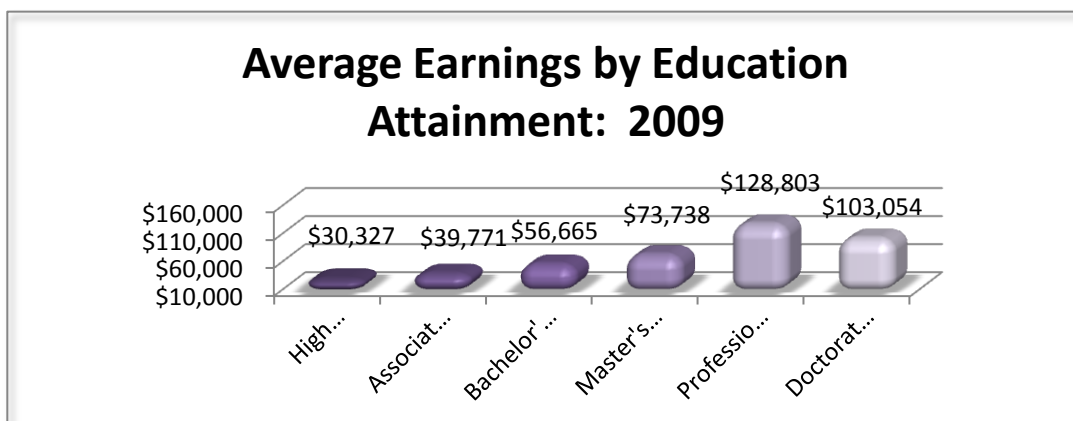
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Is Graduate School For You?

Should you go straight to graduate school? There are no hard and fast rules. It is a good idea to talk with faculty, prospective employers and students currently pursuing programs of interest to you in order to hear their perspectives on the advantages of immediate vs. delayed entry into graduate school.

You may want to consider these questions before making your decision:

- Are you reasonably sure of your career goals, or is there a strong possibility that you could change your mind after a taste of the working world?
- Would related work experience help you clarify ambiguous career goals?
- How much will your job and salary prospects be enhanced by a graduate degree? The master's degree recipient almost always commands a higher yearly rate of pay. A \$6,000-\$8,000 differential is common, while in some technical disciplines \$10,000-\$12,000 is not uncommon.
- Is an advanced degree a prerequisite to your chosen career? The doctorate is mandatory for practicing medicine or law, for example.
- What are the direct and indirect costs of graduate school? Include the cost of the program and books, living expenses and loss of income while you are in school.
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?
- Do you have a strong GPA? Would work experience enhance your application credentials by offsetting mediocre grades or test scores? In the case of some professional schools, admissions committees are generally as interested in your work background as in your "numbers."
- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, The 2012 Statistical Abstract – The National Data Book
<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/education.html>

Timetable for Applying to Graduate School

It is a good idea to prepare a timeline with specific deadlines once you have decided to continue your education and go on for your Master's and/or Ph.D. Below is a suggested timeline adapted from www.fastweb.com.

Junior Year

- **Keep your grades up.** Your GPA is a factor in admission decisions.
- **Research graduate programs.** See page 4 for recommendations on how to conduct a search.
- **Find out what standardized test is required for the programs to which you plan to apply.** GRE, GMAT, MAT, MCAT, LSAT, etc.
- **Consider the cost of graduate school.**
- **Cultivate relationships with your professors.** As part of your graduate school application you will be asked to provide letters of recommendation.
- **If you are applying to medical school, contact BSU's Pre-health advisor.**

Summer Before Senior Year

- **Narrow your school choice.** Select one or two dream schools, a few middle of the road schools and one or two back-up schools. Download or request information from each graduate school of interest.
- **Begin the application process.** Create an Excel spreadsheet of the colleges/universities you are applying for and when their applications are due.
- **Study for standardized test.**
- **Draft a personal statement of your academic and professional goals.** Adapt it to each school's statement guidelines.

Fall Semester of Senior Year

- **Share your personal statements with professors.** Ask professors that you know well if they would review your personal statements and provide feedback.
- **Visit the Writing Center and have them review your personal statements.** The Writing Center is located in the Academic Achievement Center.
- **Request letters of recommendation from faculty.** Ask professors whom you know well if they would be willing to write you a strong letter of recommendation. Give them specific information about deadlines and follow up to ensure they meet that deadline. Note: Be sure to give them at least 4 – 6 weeks to complete.
- **Schedule your standardized test.** Visit or contact the BSU Testing Center located in the Academic Achievement Center.
- **Request Transcripts.** Each graduate school will ask you to provide them with official transcripts. They can be purchased for a small fee through the Registrar's Office.
- **Know the due date of your graduate school applications and submit early.**
- **Search for scholarships and financial aid.** Visit graduate school financial aid office websites and search on-line databases such as fastweb.com.

Spring Semester of Senior Year

- **Fill out the FASFA application after January 1 but before March 1.**
- **Submit your applications to those graduate schools whose deadlines have not passed.**
- **Arrange a visit to all prospective graduate schools, if possible.** It may help you decide on where or where not you would like to go.
- **Prepare for your admissions interview.** Practice beforehand.
- **By April 1st, you should receive admission letters.** April 15th is the typical deadline for you to accept or decline offers.
- **Send thank you notes to the people who assisted you in the application process –** professors, advisors, etc.

Graduate School Search

There are various on-line graduate school search sites that can assist you in identifying graduate programs that best fit your interests. A sampling is provided below.



www.gradschools.com: With almost 60,000 programs listed in its free directory, gradschools.com is the leading online resource for graduate schools.

www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx: The Peterson's Graduate Schools page provides articles, program searches and suggestions/tips with regards to graduate school planning.

www.graduateguide.com: A directory of graduate schools in the United States and Canada that will help you find colleges and universities that offer accredited graduate programs that most interest you.

<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>: U.S. News & World Report analyzed more than 1,200 graduate programs to generate rankings for the best graduate school programs in the United States.

<https://services.aamc.org/30/msar/>: The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) provides a Medical School Directory with information on both U.S. and Canadian medical schools.

Factors to Consider when Choosing a Graduate School

Admission: What are the admission requirements – GPA and test scores? Will it be easier to get accepted after gaining work experience?

Programs Offered: What specializations are available? Does the program provide internships or practicums? Are there research opportunities?

Faculty: Do they hold degrees in fields of expertise from leading universities? What awards, grants and special recognition have they earned? What have they published? What research projects have they conducted? Is there diversity? What is the faculty to student ratio?

Program Structure: What is the average length of time spent in the program?

Reputation: Is the university accredited? Is the program nationally ranked in terms of excellence? Is the program well established or relatively new?

Physical Facilities: Is there a comprehensive reference collection in the library? Are there sufficient classrooms and seminar rooms? Are the surroundings attractive and pleasant?

Cost: What are the tuition and fees? What financial aid is available in the form of loans, scholarships and grants? Are there teaching, research and graduate assistantships available?

Geographic Location: Consider the weather. Would you prefer an urban or suburban setting? Does the area offer cultural and recreational activities? Is this a place where I might want to stay?

Size & Student Population: Look at the size of the department as well as the university. A large institution will have more extensive facilities and libraries; a smaller school will offer more personal attention and a sense of community. What is the makeup of the student body in terms of age, diversity, religion, etc?

The Application Process

General Procedures



Request Information: Request or download applications, catalogs and financial aid information approximately one year before you intend to enter graduate school. Application requirements differ substantially among institutions and programs. Read each school's material conscientiously to make sure you file a complete and timely application.

Apply Early: Application deadlines can range from August 1 (before senior year) to July (after senior year for schools with rolling admissions). On average most graduate application deadlines fall within December and March. Admission and financial aid decisions are often made well in advance of stated deadlines. Departments in heavy demand may close applications early. If admissions are handled on a "rolling" basis (i.e., qualified applicants are accepted as they apply) it is to your advantage to apply at the earliest possible date to receive maximum consideration. Since approximately one-half of graduate school candidates apply during the last month before deadlines, an early application can set you apart from the competition.

The Application Package

- Application form
- Non-refundable fee
- Separate financial aid application
- Transcripts
- Standardized test scores
- Documentation of Licensure (Education applicants)
- Resume
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal statement/essay
- Personal interview



How to Apply

The Application Form: All forms should be filled out clearly, accurately, and free of typographical and grammatical errors. Be consistent in spelling out your full, legal name on all forms.

Application Fees: Fees vary, ranging from \$50-75 in most cases. **Note:** Any BSU undergraduate student who previously received an ATP Summer or Semester Grant is eligible for reimbursement of graduate and professional school application expenses up to \$300. These include application fees, entrance exam fees, and study materials for exams.



Financial Aid: An application for financial aid will generally come either as part of your application packet or in a separate mailing from a campus financial aid office. You may have to apply separately for fellowships and for loans. Since financial support varies widely from institution to institution, the best advice is to read all financial aid materials carefully and to file documents on time. Keep in mind that assistantships can help defray your costs and give you experience at the same time.

Transcripts and Grades: Have your registrar's office send a transcript of your undergraduate work directly to the admissions office of the schools to which you are applying. Grades are extremely important, but a GPA that does not quite meet the minimum standards can be offset with good letters of recommendation, high test scores and a well-written statement of purpose.

Test Scores: Most schools require that you take one or more standardized admissions exams before they decide upon your application. The GRE (Graduate Record Examination), MAT (Miller Analogy Test), GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), MCAT (Medical College Admission Test) and LSAT (Law School Admission Test) are among the more common standardized tests. The school's catalog/application materials will specify which test you need and will often give some indication of the score needed to be competitive for the program.

Documentation of Licensure: All education applicants are required to submit a documentation of license status form and/or a copy of their teacher licensure.

Resume: A large majority of graduate school programs require a resume as part of the application package. This can serve as a good supplement. It can provide the admissions committee with more information than what is included on the application.

Letters of Recommendation: Most institutions will typically request three letters of recommendation. It is best to obtain recommendations from faculty members and employers who are qualified to evaluate your academic and work performance, based on personal observation. Approach your references early in the fall of your senior year to give them time (4 – 6 weeks notice) to write your recommendation before their other academic pressures mount.



The Personal Essay: Every graduate school application contains an essay portion or a “personal statement/statement of purpose.” Your essay should specifically address questions posed in the application, and express your enthusiasm for the field of study, your motivation, creativity, maturity, and personal uniqueness. The essay is a key measure of your ability to communicate, so it pays to be meticulous about spelling, grammar and writing style.

Personal Interviews: Some graduate and professional schools will grant an interview as part of the application process. The interview gives the admissions committee an opportunity to determine if there is a match with what their institution has to offer. The interview provides an excellent opportunity to “sell yourself.” In addition take this opportunity to discuss your qualifications, personal goals, and why you think you are a perfect match for the program.

Financial Aid

A major question students face when considering graduate school is “How will I pay for my graduate education?” The cost of attending graduate school includes tuition, fees, books and living expenses, the total of which should be taken into account when reviewing colleges. Financial aid is available for graduate study. The following are tips and resources available to assist you in researching options.



When to Apply:

The FASFA Priority Deadline is after January 1 but before March 1. Check with your school to be sure they do not require it sooner.

Free Application for Federal Student Assistance (FAFSA):

The standard form for federal loans; available at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

FELLOWSHIPS: Granted by individual universities based on merit, not need, usually cover tuition and expenses. Fellowships do not require repayment.



ASSISTANTSHIPS: Stipend and tuition waivers for matriculated students in exchange for services, teaching or research.

SCHOLARSHIPS: Sum of money awarded to matriculated students based on criteria determined by the donor of the scholarship. Students do not need to pay back the money awarded in a scholarship.

GRANTS: Sum of money awarded to an individual based on demonstrated financial need that does not need to be repaid. Most commonly you can find grants from both federal and state governments, universities and both public and private organizations.

LOANS: Sum of money that is provided to students based on financial need that must be paid back with interest.

TYPES OF LOANS

Stafford Loans

Perkins Loans

GradPlus Loans

Private Loans

State Loans

Direct Consolidation Loans

RESOURCES

www.gradloans.com

www.finaid.org

www.fastweb.com

www.collegegrant.net

<http://studentaid.ed.gov>

www.scholarship.com

Admissions Testing



Think the SAT was your final encounter with that sophisticated form of torture known as standardized testing? Not so fast! Now that your career plans include law, medicine, business, education, or other pursuits requiring a graduate degree, odds are you will be asked to run the test gauntlet again. For many grad school applicants, test scores play a pivotal role in determining which institution they attend—and in some cases, whether they attend at all.

The Tests

The following are the four major graduate school admissions tests:

Graduate Record Examinations (GRE): The GRE is the most widely accepted graduate admissions test in the world. Applicants come from varying educational and cultural backgrounds and the GRE provides a common measure for comparing candidates. This instrument measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning and analytical writing. The GRE is usually less of a make-it or break-it proposition than its professional test counterparts. *Information is provided by www.gre.org.*

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT): More than 4,800 graduate management programs around the world use GMAT scores as a part of their admissions process. The GMAT consists of three main parts—the Analytical Writing Assessment, the Quantitative section, and the Verbal section. At most business schools, particularly the top business schools, GMAT scores count heavily in the admissions process. *Information is provided by www.mba.com.*

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess the examinee's problem solving, critical thinking, writing skills and knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine. Scores are reported in Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, Writing Sample and Biological Sciences. Almost all U.S. medical schools require applicants to submit MCAT exam scores. A good performance on the MCAT, like a strong grade point average, remains a stringent precondition of medical school admission. *Information is provided by www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/.*

Law School Admission Test (LSAT): The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is a half-day, standardized test administered four times each year at designated testing centers throughout the world. The test is an integral part of the law school admission process in the United States, Canada and a growing number of other countries. It provides a standard measure of acquired reading and verbal reasoning skills that law schools can use as one of several factors in assessing applicants. *Information is provided by www.lsac.org.*

Other Tests: Some schools may require other graduate school admissions tests, including the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), and the more specialized Dental Admission Test (DAT), Optometry Admissions Test (OAT), Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT), Veterinary Aptitude Test (VAT) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Test Preparation

You need to evaluate your time, financial resources and goals in determining which of these options you will choose for test preparation.

- **Review Study Questions/Practice Tests on Test Developer Website.**

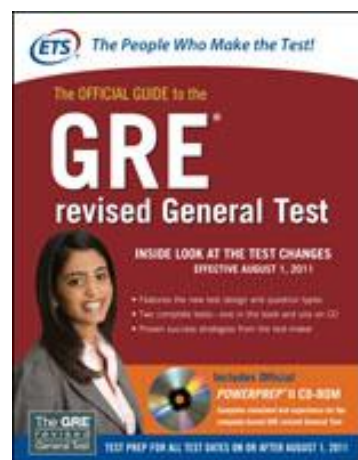
If you go to the Test Developer's website you can review free sample questions/practice tests similar to those you will find on your test. MCAT provides additional practice tests that you can purchase for a fee of \$35. GMAT allows you to download paper tests directly from their website for a fee of \$30.

- **Download a Practice Book from Test Developer Website.**

Download the Practice Book for the paper-based GRE revised General Test including a full-length paper-based test.

- **Use the GRE or GMAT Test Prep Software.**

Prep software is available for free through Test Developer website. The Powerprep software is a computer program designed to help you get ready to take the GMAT or the computer based version of the GRE revised General Test.



- **Purchase a Test Preparation Book from the Test Developer Website or Your Local Bookstore.**

These books can be downloaded in a print or as an eBook directly through some of the test developers' websites. The GRE and LSAT Test Preparation Books/Tests can be downloaded directly through their website. Prep books are also widely available in a bookstore. They range in cost from \$10 – \$100.

- **Register for a Study Course Through A Local College.**

Boston College, UMass Boston and Middlesex Community College are a few of the colleges in Massachusetts that offer prep courses. They range in cost from \$130.00 to \$600.00. This option is great for someone who learns best in a structured environment.

- **Register for a Classroom Course, One-On-One Tutoring, Online Training or Online Video On Demand Instruction through Kaplan or Princeton Review.**

This is the most expensive test preparation option; although most test review courses guarantee results. Costs can be from \$500 to \$2500. Just like the study courses mentioned above, this option may be useful to students who need a regularly scheduled class period to keep them motivated.

Letters of Recommendation



Nearly every graduate school requests at least three letters of recommendation. A graduate school letter of recommendation is a letter written on a student's behalf, usually by a faculty member that recommends the student for a graduate program. Letters of recommendation come into play when an admissions committee is trying to decide between you and one or more candidates that have similar grades, test scores and work/internship experience.

Tips on Selecting References

- Choose professors, preferably in your major, and/or employers with whom you have a good relationship. It's important that they know several facets about you: your character, your coursework, your initiative and your communication skills.
- Do not use references from friends or relatives or recommendations from people who do not know you well.
- Determine who will be your best advocates. If you sense reluctance - complaints about not having enough time to write the recommendations or not knowing you well enough or long enough—move on.
- Schedule a time to meet with your references *in person* to discuss your plans on applying to graduate school. Ask them if they would be willing to serve as a reference.
- Provide your references with a copy of your resume, a paragraph explaining your career interests and/or your reasons for attending graduate school, a list of courses that you have taken with them, unofficial transcripts and any other materials they feel will assist them in writing a good letter.
- Include your references' telephone numbers on applications. More than ever, admissions officers are inclined to place a phone call to a reference for more details.
- Provide your references with the necessary forms, plus addressed, stamped envelopes.
- Give your references 4-6 weeks notice to write the reference and ask them to meet a specific deadline.
- Let your references know when you will submit your applications so he or she can send the reference letters at the same time.
- Send thank you letters to all references.

Application Essays

Writing an essay, or personal statement, is often the most difficult part of the application process. Requirements vary widely in this regard. Some programs request only one or two paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, while others require five or six separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your greatest achievements and solutions to hypothetical problems.

Tips and Considerations

- Make an outline to assist you in writing a well-organized and detailed essay.
- Try writing spontaneously and see where it leads.
- Tell a story about yourself. It may be a good way of conveying your motivation and the experiences that have led you on your career path.
- Research each program that you will be applying to so that you can tailor your essay to that particular institution and its program.
- Explain why you want to study the field you've chosen and why you want to study it at that institution. Explain your short and long term goals. Demonstrate your knowledge of the school, why the school is the right place for you and why you would be a good asset.
- Consider your hobbies, projects, jobs, personal and academic accomplishments, major life events that have changed you and motivated your education, challenges that you have overcome and the people who have influenced or inspired you when you write your essay.
- Make sure you answer the question(s) being asked.
- Be specific and provide examples when possible.
- Your introductory paragraph is the most important. It should relay your main idea and set the framework for the rest of the essay. Be sure to grab the reader's attention.
- When concluding your essay, think about the most important points you want your readers to remember (without repeating).
- Avoid clichés. Try to be original.
- Speak in first person. However, don't overuse the word "I".
- Personal statements are typically 500 - 600 words long unless otherwise specified. Be sure not to exceed the limit provided.
- Essays should be typed. Attach pages to your application if the space provided is insufficient.
- Spelling and grammar are important. Editing and feedback are crucial. Ask a faculty member that you have a good relationship with review it.

Graduate School Interview

Many graduate school programs may include an interview as part of the application process. Receiving a letter or phone call requesting an interview clearly indicates that you are a serious candidate. Keep in mind that not all graduate programs require an interview. Graduate School interviews can take various forms including one-on-one, group, phone, etc. During your interview you may meet with several faculty members as well as current graduate students.

Pre-Interview Preparation

- Discuss with fellow BSU students their experiences at graduate school interviews.
- Review the essay that you submitted with your graduate school application.
- Make a list of your experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, relating to the field of study you are pursuing.
- Conduct research on the school, graduate program, and faculty.
- Find a list of common interview questions, pages 13-16, and practice answering them.
- Confirm the date, time and location of the interview as well as with whom.



The Day of the Interview



- Arrive 15 minutes early.
- Dress appropriately – wear a suit.
- Bring copies of your resume/CV, papers and/or presentations.
- Shake hands with the interviewer or anyone else you meet during your visit.
- Address the interviewer by their title and name.
- Maintain good eye-contact and body posture.
- Demonstrate your interest in the school and program.
- Discuss your career goals and achievements.
- Ask thoughtful questions. Questions that show you have done your homework are a plus.
- Upon completion of the interview, return home and write/send thank you notes.

Commonly Asked Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What do you consider your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
3. Why are you interested in our graduate program?
4. In what ways have your previous experiences prepared you for our program?
5. What factors influenced you to go to graduate school?
6. What skills and personal characteristics make you a good candidate?
7. What do you hope to gain from our graduate program?
8. How does our program fit into your career goals?
9. What are your career goals for the next five years? 10 years?
10. How do you feel your undergraduate studies have prepared you for this program?
11. Describe your past work/volunteer experiences and how what you have learned from them will help you in graduate school.
12. Describe any research experience you have had.
13. What recent professional articles or books have you read?
14. What problems do you expect to face while attending graduate school? How will you handle these?
15. What contributions do you plan to make to the field?
16. What do you believe to be the major trends in your intended career field at this time?
17. What do you think about _____ (current event)?
18. What do you think is the most important development in the field over the past 25 years, and why?
19. We are looking at many other candidates for this graduate program; what sets you apart from the others?
20. What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies or outside interests?
21. Tell me about a major accomplishment and how you achieved it.
22. Give an example of an ethical dilemma you faced and explain how you resolved it.
23. Tell me about a situation in which you took initiative.
24. Tell me about a time you assumed a leadership role.
25. Tell me how you handle stress.
26. Tell me about a time you had a number of assignments due. How did you make sure you completed all of them on time and did a good job?

27. Tell me about a time you were confronted by a fellow student, co-worker, or a customer. How did you handle it to resolve the conflict?
28. How would your teachers and/or supervisors describe you?
29. Why should we accept you to our program?
30. What do you believe your greatest challenge will be if you are accepted into this program?
31. Why do you want to become a _____?
32. What other schools have you applied for?
33. Why did you get a poor grade in_____?
34. Did you participate in any special projects in college?
35. What has been your most significant accomplishment to date?
36. What will you do if you are not accepted?
37. How do you rank among other students in your major at your school?
38. If you are accepted to more than one school, how will you decide which to attend?
39. Can you explain why your admission test scores went up (down) when you took the test a second time?
40. What message would you like me to convey to the admission committee on your behalf?
41. What were your most favorite and least favorite courses in college?
42. Have you been interviewed or accepted at any other school?
43. Do you feel your academic record accurately reflects your abilities and potential?
44. What courses have been most difficult for you?
45. How do you motivate yourself?
46. Explain a situation in which you had a conflict and how you resolved it. What did you learn?
47. Describe a group project you've worked on and what role you took.
48. What courses have you enjoyed the most? The least?
49. In what would you like to specialize?

Questions Applicants May Ask Interviewers



1. What characteristics are specific to this program and distinguish it from competitors?
2. Where are recent alumni employed? What do most students do after graduation?
3. Are there teaching and/or research opportunities available?
4. As part of your curriculum, I noticed that a practicum is required of all graduate students. Can you give me some examples of internship placements?
5. How long does it typically take students to graduate?
6. How long do most students take to complete their dissertations?
7. When will applicants be notified if they are accepted into the program?
8. What graduate school funding do you commonly give graduate students?
9. What are your current research topics? Do graduate students have an opportunity to assist?
10. How many graduate students earn their degree/ year?
11. What kind of facilities do you have?
12. How diverse is the program? What percent of students in the program are minority?
13. Do you have graduate school housing available?
14. How do students from this school perform on licensing exams? How does the school assist students who don't pass?
15. What is the faculty-to-student ratio?
16. How would you describe your mentoring style and expectations?

Questions You May Ask Current Graduate Students



1. What do you consider to be the best and most challenging aspects of this program?
2. What is one thing you wish you had known or understood better before coming here?
3. How would you rate the difficulty of this program?
4. I know most of my time will be spent studying and doing research, but what is the extracurricular life like here?
5. How much time does your advisor spend one-on-one with his/her advisees? What is his/her mentorship style – hands off or hands on? How much feedback does he or she give on written work?
6. Do most students connect well with each other and with faculty members? Why or why not?
7. Have you had any problem finding funding? How often have you needed to take out student loans? What's the cost of living in this area – how much is rent, typically?
8. On average, how many students are in your classes?
9. Have you started your thesis/dissertation? How long has it taken? (If applicable to the program)
10. Have you taken the comprehensive exam? How did you prepare? (If applicable to the program)