

# CAREER CORNER

#3 IN A SERIES

## Is Graduate School in Your Plans?

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*Like many Excelsior College students, you may be considering graduate study. Pursuing a graduate degree is an important life choice that can provide wonderful opportunities for your future. Before embarking on this journey, however, you may want to learn more about the dynamics of a graduate education, reflect on why you want to achieve this goal, and determine how you will integrate it into your educational and career plans.*

### Why Pursue Higher Education ?

There are many reasons to continue your education. To ensure a sound decision, careful consideration is necessary. Do you have a clear sense of what career you are interested in? Are you looking for a career change? Is an advanced degree required for your chosen field? If so, then graduate school would be a prudent step. Perhaps you enjoy lifelong learning and wish to immerse yourself in the study of a particular subject purely for the love of it. If that is the case, your graduate studies would probably yield a satisfying and valuable experience. Whether your motives are for professional or personal growth, a graduate degree can lay the groundwork for your long range lifestyle goals.

Depending on your own individual situation, there are good reasons for either continuing your studies immediately after college or waiting a few years before obtaining an advanced degree. Beginning a graduate program following the completion of a

four-year degree can make use of the educational momentum you have already developed. For programs where you are building on an undergraduate major in a rapidly changing field (such as computer science or biological science), you may want to go directly to graduate school to maintain the most current advances in the field. If you want to pursue graduate study but are unsure of the specific focus, consider obtaining a year or two of work experience related to your interests. This may give you some time to add to your perspective, formulate further career plans and/or develop financial resources for your venture. A final option for consideration is to attend graduate school part time and combine your studies with part-time or full-time employment.

### What Program Is Right For You ?

As you may know, there are two major types of graduate degrees, professional and academic. These degrees are awarded at two levels — master's and doctoral. Academic degrees focus on original research, while professional degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for practicing in the profession. Master's degrees may take one to three years to earn, and doctorates generally take three or more years to complete. For many fields, the master's degree may be the only professional degree needed for employment. Examples of these are the Master of Business Administration (MBA), the Master of Social Work (MSW), and the Master of Fine Arts (MFA). For other careers, the doctorate is necessary. Included in this category are the Doctor of Medicine (MD), the Doctor of Jurisprudence (JD), and for college teaching and original research in a specific field, the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

### What Are The Deciding Factors ?

When deciding where to apply and ultimately choosing which graduate program to enter, you will need to explore which institutions and programs are best suited to you, your academic background and career goals. Be sure to learn about all of your options. Seek the advice of faculty, advisors, graduate students and professionals in your field of interest. Gather information via the Internet or your local library. As you research graduate schools, consider what kind of environment will best serve your field of study and your personal needs. If a geographic move is not possible, you may want to think about pursuing your studies through a distance learning program such as Excelsior College. (For additional information on graduate school references, see resources listed on the reverse.)

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## A Goal Worth Achieving

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Earning a graduate degree can be a wonderful investment in your future. It is an educational endeavor that can bring you to the threshold of a new career path and allow you greater freedom to make your own choices and pursue your own interests.

As you narrow down your choices, additional factors to evaluate include learning more about the prestige of the college and the reputation and size of the program. Inquire about the credentials of the faculty. How many students are enrolled and what is the student-faculty ratio? Investigate other resources such as internships and post-graduate employment opportunities. Of course, one of the most important considerations is cost. How will you pay for your graduate study? Is financial assistance available? Explore which schools offer the most attractive scholarships, loans, fellowships, and other forms of financial aid. When you decide on your top choices, make an appointment to visit the schools. Talk with admissions staff, faculty, and current graduate students to gain a more in-depth perspective. If you are unable to physically visit, take a virtual trip to the institution's Web site. Seek online opportunities to pose any questions you may have.

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### How Does the Application Process Work ?

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Once you know where you want to apply for graduate study, there are several steps to follow. The key is to start gathering information early. It is a good idea to begin the process about eighteen months prior to your anticipated matriculation date. Application deadlines vary among institutions, so it is important to know each time line in advance. Generally speaking, deadlines fall between January and March. Some schools may have rolling admissions.

You will first need to request an application form and information regarding admissions requirements. Along with completing the application, you will be required to write an essay or statement about your background and interests as they pertain to your field of study. This is a vital part of the application process, so be sure to give it adequate attention. Official transcripts of undergraduate work should be forwarded to the graduate school as well. Two or three letters of recommendation from professors, advisors, and/or employers will also be needed. Provide your supporters with any information about yourself that would be helpful, and give them enough time to draft this letter. Most graduate schools charge an application fee. Some fees may be waived if you meet certain financial criteria. Schools also generally require that you take a graduate admission test. Tests vary by type of graduate study. The application process can be time consuming. However, the energy expended may improve your chances of being accepted into your program of choice.

### Resources For Graduate School:

*To learn more about the master's degrees offered from the Schools of Liberal Arts, Nursing, and Business, visit the Excelsior College Web site and click on the links for each school to view the master's programs.*

#### Web sites:

**The Graduate Planner** (Peterson's)  
<http://www.petersons.com/graduate/>

**Online Learning Programs** (Peterson's)  
<http://www.petersons.com/dlearn/>

**America's Best Graduate Schools, U.S. News and World Report.**  
[http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/rankindex\\_brief.php](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/rankindex_brief.php)

**Test Prep** (Peterson's)  
<http://www.petersons.com/testprep/default.asp?id=881&path=gr.pft.gmat/>

**EssayEdge.com**  
<http://www.essayedge.com/>

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**The Internet resources listed above may change over time.** Enrolled students and alumni can access the most current information as well as many additional career-related links on the Excelsior College Web site. Go to **www.excelsior.edu**, then log in and click on the Career Resources link on your MyEC page; for graduates, click on the Alumni Connection.

### Questions or comments about this article?

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