

Written by:
Rebecca Mattano
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The Center for Land Use Education
College of Natural Resources
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

Basic Guide to Graduate School

Created as a Reference Guide for Undergraduates
in Land Use Planning



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Point

Does the program provide mentors/supervisors
Is the faculty strong

Costs

Tuition

Living costs

Transportation costs

Housing costs

Health Insurance options

Is there financial aid available

What will be your income

Work

Careers of previous graduates

Is there job placement assistance upon graduation

(Carmichael, 2003)

Resources

Publications

Peterson's Guides offer descriptions of programs organized by field of study along with most of the essential information such as tuition and entrance requirements.

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning website (listed below) also provides a guide for prospective graduate and Ph.D. students.

Many of the guides available may not directly list land use planning or related degrees so the Library and Internet will be a useful source for information on programs.

References

1. Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. *Guide to Graduate and Undergraduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning, 11th edition*. Retrieved October 6, 2004 from: http://www.acsp.org/Guide/guide_index.htm
2. Carmichael, Kerry. (2003). *Graduate School Guide for Returned Peace Corps Volunteers*. Peace Corps: Washington D. C.
3. Hamel, April Vahle. (1994) *Graduate School Funding Handbook*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, PA

Questions You Need to Ask Yourself

1. Why do I want to further my education, specifically?
2. What do I hope/want to accomplish by acquiring an advanced degree?
3. Do I have enough focus on a career to start graduate school?
4. Should I take some time off between my undergraduate schooling and get more experience and focus in the "real world", or to pay off some of my debt, or should I travel around before I commit to something else?
5. Am I deciding to go to graduate school because:
 - It is what I want
 - Because it is what my parents want me to do
 - I am worried about my undergraduate debts
 - I am concerned I will not get a job
6. If I am already working, do I really need a graduate degree to enhance my career opportunities?
(Hamel, 1994).

Clarify Your Career Goals

It is important to clarify your career goals before applying to graduate school. A poorly made decision can lead to:

1. Dropping out without completing your advanced degree program
2. Lost opportunity
3. Unnecessary educational debt.

Long term motivation will see you through the extended rigors of graduate education and professional training. You must begin by examining your personal interests and skills.

(Hamel, 1994).

A Planner's Education

Today, most people need a professional Masters Degree in Planning to get the best planning jobs. You do not need to have a BS/BA in Planning to do graduate work in planning. There are over 70 US programs that offer accredited Masters degrees in Planning.

(ACSP, 2004).

discussion sections, assign and grade written assignments, grade exams, help with equipment, tutor students, etc..

Research Assistantship

This is primarily in areas where faculty has large research grants that include student support or in areas with large training grants from federal government programs. Most research assistantships are found within science and engineering programs.

Graduate Assistantship

Students may do a variety of tasks that does not directly fit into an TA or RA definition.

College Work Study

Students are employed in offices on campus.

Loans and Financial Aid

Students borrow money from the government and usually must pay it back. Check with schools about application deadlines,

(Adapted from Hamel, 1994 and Carmichael, 2003).

Final Questions About Choosing a Graduate Program

Location

Geography, climate, transportation, size of community and cost of living.

Community

Urban or rural

Cultures

Academic Program

How long has the program existed

Is the program expanding

Can you handle the required course load

define these goals.

8. **Explain why you want to attend the specific program to which you are applying.** Present evidence that you have researched the program, the faculty, and the resources.
9. **Don't worry about length limits.** Just make sure it is well written, authentic and eloquent.
(Carmichael, 2004)

Funding

Tuition Scholarships

Tuition remission or waivers are meant to reduce the amount of tuition a student has to pay. When applying to programs you should ask about the availability of tuition scholarships.

Fellowships, Grants and Awards

Fellowships are monies to support the students to cover room and board, books, and supplies. This money is usually provided by the university as a stipend and students do not have to work or pay back any of the money provided. All of these options usually do not require pay back or work but are given on a competitive basis.

Assistantships

Students perform some duty in exchange for a stipend. There are three forms:

Teaching Assistantship

Students will typically spend five to twenty hours a week assisting a professor with classes or teaching a course. Teaching assistants tend to supervise labs, run

Types of Graduate Degree Programs Related to Land Use Planning

There are a variety of different graduate degrees and institutions across the nation and abroad.

In Wisconsin:

UW-Madison– MS and Ph.D. in Urban and Regional Planning

UW-Milwaukee– Masters in Urban Planning

UW-Green Bay– Environmental Science and Policy

Across the Nation

MS in Preservation Planning

Masters in City Planning

Master in Regional Planning

MS in Planning

MS in Natural Resources, Science and Management

Masters in Community Planning

MA in Community Development

MS in Urban Studies

MS in Resource Planning

Masters in City and Regional Planning

MS in Transportation, Technology and Policy

Masters in Community and Regional Planning

MS in Transportation Planning

Masters in Public Administration

MA in Environment and Community

Masters in Rural and Town Planning

Masters in Strategic Planning for Critical Infrastructure

Masters in Environmental Planning

MA in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning

As you answer the basic questions and then clarify your career goals, you can determine which program would best suit your needs. You can then begin researching the institutions that offer that specific degree. You can also start your search regionally and find out what schools in your area offer graduate programs.

How To Select the Best School

Researching schools today is easy because most schools have websites and you can always talk to friends, former professors, professionals in the field, advisors and attend graduate school fairs and forums. For people in Planning there is one guide developed by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. On the website they offer a great resource that includes a *Guide to Undergraduate and Graduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning*, along with a list of planning schools, careers opportunities, Ph.D. programs and numerous other important resources. You can find all of this information on their website:

http://www.acsp.org/Guide/guide_index.htm

The better the graduate program, the better the career opportunities of its advanced degree holders. You should seek admission to the school that provide you the best professional training you can afford. Another important factor in determining the quality of the program is the qualifications and interests of the faculty. Other factors include the overall quality of the students accepted, facilities, job placement, and personal criteria such as cost of living, location and size of school. In the end, it is your responsibility to select and apply to programs based on the criteria you consider the most important.

1. **Good writing is well edited and rewritten.** This should be considered a writing test and applicants should focus on content, organization and style.
2. **Do not tell the admission committee what you think they want to hear.** You should tell the committee what you think is important about your background and achievements.
3. **Explain your motivation for graduate study.** Be clear. Specify the degree you seek and if necessary explain using past experiences or your undergraduate education.
4. **Emphasize your strengths and accomplishments.** Applicants should note intellectual strengths and life accomplishments. This can include ingratiate or previous academic achievements, grade point average, and any honors. This can also include life and work experience.
5. **Be Specific and present evidence.** When explaining a particular strength or accomplishment, add in specific details.
6. **Write with integrity.** Express your opinions and take a stand on issues without taking controversial and radical political positions. Admission committees look for thoughtful applicants who show they can make and present informed decisions that were developed through life experience and can be supported with relevant facts.
7. **Explain your career goals.** Discuss short and long term goals and how graduate school can help you

Many schools look carefully at GRE scores for admissions decisions, so it is important to do well. You will need to study and practice for the general test and especially the subject tests. There is an option to take the GRE again, although most institutions do not look favorably on the second score. **Practice, study, practice and study!**

To get more information on the GRE go to: www.ets.org (Carmichael, 2003).

Letters of Recommendation

Graduate schools normally will require three letters of recommendation, some application packets may even include recommendation forms. These recommendation forms or letters should be mailed directly to the educational institution. These letters are another extremely important component of your application and should be written by someone who knows intellectual ability and skills well. Former professors, present and former employers or supervisors, and co-workers would all be acceptable to write a letter of recommendation.

Statement of Purpose/Admission Essay

Some schools may require only a few hundred words as a statement of purpose, others may request examples of writing or an admission essay. All of these are another critical component of the application package. These usually help the admission committee to gain a sense of the applicants commitment to the pursuit of higher education.

The following are some hints about writing a strong statement of purpose:

How to Choose the Best Planning Program

All accredited planning programs cover the same set of core materials and techniques, although in different ways. Planning programs vary in the issues they emphasize, the research, and the projects they engage in. Therefore it is important to understand the program and have your career goals determined.

To determine which Planning Program will provide you the best education and training, decide what issues you would like to highlight throughout your education and into the professional specialization you are heading. For example, planning programs located near the ocean may concentrate on coastal resource planning; programs in large farming areas may focus on rural and small urban planning issues. Some programs may work closely with local communities, others may look to international communication and planning.

Prospective graduate and Ph.D. planning students can use the *Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning Guide* to help locate and learn about different programs. This guide is set up to help students quickly evaluate large numbers of Planning Programs through comparison of various factors such as; course offerings, requirements, tuition, faculty experience, and the type of students currently in the program. This guide can help you narrow down your choices. Once you have identified some schools you think would meet your needs and career interests you can contact them directly.

There is no way to rank these schools because they all offer different areas of expertise. Only each individual can decide what the best school is based on their needs and interests and the resources offered through that school.
(ACSP, 2004).

The Application Process

1. Request an application from up to six different schools, some schools may offer their application online and accept them electronically. The application fee usually ranges from \$30 to \$50.
2. The process can take a long time. It can take weeks even months to prepare an application and gather transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation. **Plan Ahead** and **Pay Attention to the Deadlines.**
3. Try to get your application in at least one month prior to the deadline. Early applications may get more careful consideration than those that arrive close to the deadline. Also, this will allow time to resolve any last minute problems such as late letters of recommendation and transcripts or incomplete or incorrect forms.
4. Make copies of all your applications, send by certified mail, return receipt requested, if possible. You should receive notice that the university has received your application, if you do not receive this card within a certain amount of time, you might want to make a phone call to the University.
(Carmichael, 2003).

Admission Tests

Standardized Testing

The most common standardized test is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) administered by the Educational Testing Services. The GRE is divided into a general test and subject test. Each school and program requires different tests. It is best to take the GRE the spring, summer or fall of the year before you want to enter graduate school. The GRE is usually a computer based test that you must register for and pay to take. The cost of the general test is \$115 and these tests are offered all year round. The cost for the subject tests is \$130 and these tests are only offered three times a year, in the United States.

The general test consists of three basic components:

- Verbal: 30 minute section
- Quantitative: 60 minute section
- Analytical Writing 75 minute section

If you take the General test you can view your unofficial verbal and quantitative scores immediately, but because the analytical portion is an essay, you will not be able to view that score. The test scores will be sent to you and the institutions you choose within 10-15 days.

The GRE subject tests are only given three times a year in eight academic disciplines: biochemistry, cell and molecular biology, biology, chemistry, computer science, literature in English, mathematics, physics and psychology. The results from these tests will take four to six weeks.