



## EducationUSA Weekly Update

Special edition - "Students First", November 12th, 2008

### Students First...

A special edition of the EducationUSA Weekly Update with Dr. Martin, author of *Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*

- Article One: Seven personal questions to ask yourself about going to graduate school
- Article Two: 12-month checklist to use in searching for the right program(s)

### I. Seven personal questions to ask yourself about going to graduate school

#### Excerpt:

At some point in your recent past you have decided to consider graduate study. You may or may not end up going in that direction, but for now it is on your mind. Before going any further, ask yourself the following seven questions:

**1. Why do you want to do this?** There are many reasons. Here are some:

- To truly learn more
- To add a credential to your resume
- To have a better chance of being promoted
- To have more credibility in your chosen field
- To change careers
- To increase your earning potential
- Because of pressure from your family
- Because of a need to feel better about yourself
- Because you don't know what else to do at the moment
- Something else

What are my reasons for pursuing a graduate degree?

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Do my reasons make sense? \_\_\_\_\_

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**2. Why do you want to do this now?**

- Because you are mentally/emotionally ready for a new challenge
- Because your employer is encouraging you to do so, and might help sponsor you
- Because you have reached a plateau in your career
- Because you are not getting any younger
- Because it is a logical next step for you professionally
- Because you are ready financially
- Because you have the necessary time to commit
- Something else

Why do I want to pursue a graduate degree now?

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Do my reasons make sense? \_\_\_\_\_

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### 3. What type of academic/professional degree are you seeking?

- a. M.A., M.S., J.D., MBA, MSW, MSJ, M.Ed., etc.,
- b. Ed.D., Ph.D., LL.M., M.D., Psy.D., etc.
- c. Joint degree

If you are seeking a degree in law, medicine, or business, you have a fairly clear idea of the type of professional graduate degree you need. However, if you are thinking about education, social service, public policy, the humanities, social sciences, etc., you may want to do a more thorough search of the type of degree earned for the area in which you are interested. For example, you may not need a Ph.D. to advance in the area of public policy; a master's degree may be sufficient.

What type of degree am I seeking?

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### 4. Is there a geographic region of your country or the world where you would like to study?

Perhaps you have always wanted to live in another part of your country or go abroad for graduate study. Knowing what you are thinking as to location will help guide your search. However, at this early stage be careful not to rule out a certain location completely. During the search process, you may find that an option emerges in that geographic region that may be worth a closer look.

Where would I like to study?

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For all 7 personal questions, a 12-month checklist before applying and much more, go to Dr. Martin's website and order his book *Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*. The website address is [www.gradschoolroadmap.com](http://www.gradschoolroadmap.com).

## II. 12-month checklist to use in searching for the right program(s)

*Excerpt:*

Graduate school is not something to take lightly. It involves a major investment personally, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and financially. Be sure to allow yourself enough time to do your "due diligence" and get all of the information you want and need. It is wise to take about a year to do your research. If you are considering starting your program of study in the fall, you will want to start your search two years ahead of time. Why two years, you may ask? Typically, graduate schools start accepting applications just under a year before the intended start date. In order for you to have time to thoroughly evaluate all of the information you will receive and read, you will need at least a year before applying to gather that information and thoroughly review it.

### Twelve months before applying:

1. Answer the seven personal questions posed at the beginning of this chapter.
2. Do an initial web-based search on graduate programs, based on the answers to your personal questions. For example, if you have decided on a part-time program and know where you would like to study, do a search of educational institutions that offer a part-time program in the area and degree classification you desire. You can also do a search by program, such as Psychology, Law, Humanities, Advertising, Finance, etc. Make sure you do a couple of searches, so as many institutions matching your search criteria as possible are found.
3. Once you have done a thorough search, make an alphabetical list of all your options, regardless of what you presently know/have heard about them. Write them all down or put them on a spreadsheet. **REMEMBER: PERCEPTION IS REALITY - IT'S WHERE YOU END UP, NOT WHERE YOU START.** Be very careful about accepting word of mouth or what you think you know as final at this point in the search process. We are individuals, and as such, have different needs, expectations and experiences. This is YOUR educational experience - not someone else's. You need to start by gathering a list of options. Do not eliminate any of them at this point. You want to get as much information as possible so you can decide what options are most appealing.
4. Go online and do some initial research on all the institutions you have on your list. Assess not only the content of material on websites, but look at the way in which it is presented. Is information easy to find? Is the tone friendly and inviting? Are there easy and quick ways to request more information? Speaking of which, this would be a good time to request written information from each of the institutions. This will enable you to review what you receive any time you want. It will also provide you an opportunity to find out just how responsive admissions offices are to you. This can be very telling, and may shed light on the general level of responsiveness of those institutions about which you have made inquiry. Give each institution a grade on their website, and on the level of responsiveness they provided to you.

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Here is a suggested grading system:

| Website  | Responsiveness                                |
|--|---|
| A = easy to navigate, informative, captivating       | A = had a response within 7 business days     |
| B = well-done, good information, friendly            | B = had a response within 12 business days    |
| C = fairly easy to navigate, not as helpful/friendly | C = had a response within 17 business days    |
| D = difficult to navigate, not very informative      | D = had a response within 22 business days    |
| F = what were they thinking?                         | F = took three weeks or longer for a response |
| FF=no website, or close to nothing                   | FF = no response                              |

5. Should you consider taking a graduate level course or two now? Perhaps you were an undergraduate student awhile ago, or you may have received your bachelor's degree very recently. Either way, if your undergraduate GPA was not what you believe is competitive, or does not speak to the academic work you believe you are capable of performing, you would do well to register at a nearby institution as a non-degree student and take one or two courses. If you do, earning an A or B will be very impressive to the admissions committee, and will demonstrate that you are able to perform well as a student.

**TIP:** This is a good time to start setting aside financial resources for your search and application process. There will be standardized tests and application fees for sure. In addition, you may decide to purchase some test taking preparation materials and/or to visit some of the institutions you end up placing on your list of top options.

### Eleven months before applying:

1. Based on the two items above (website and responsiveness), you are now in a position to narrow your search a bit. But do not narrow it too much. Obviously those institutions you have graded as F or FF could most likely be eliminated. You may be surprised at some of the options you are eliminating should you rely completely on the grades given. If you still have an interest in a college/university that you did not initially grade well, keep it on the list for now. However, if you continue to get the same treatment you did when first browsing the web and/or asking for information, ask yourself the following question: If I'm being treated this way now, how will it be should I apply, be offered admission, and enroll?
2. Create a research spreadsheet to use from this point on for each of the options that remain on your list. You may have already started a spreadsheet when you did your initial research. If so, you are just expanding it now. If not, this is the time to start one. Down the left hand column will be an alphabetical list of your options. Across the top will be all of the areas about the options that you want to compare. Here are some suggestions:
  - a. Website grade
  - b. Responsiveness grade
  - c. Usefulness of printed materials/brochures
  - d. Friendliness of admissions staff
  - e. Interaction with current students
  - f. Interaction with faculty
  - g. Interaction with alumni
  - h. Campus visit/Admissions event(s) you attended
  - i. Number of students enrolled in the entire institution
  - j. Number of students enrolled in the program you are considering
  - k. Professor/student ratio
  - l. Average class size
  - m. Grading system
  - n. Facilities
  - o. Housing options (should you be re-locating)
  - p. Extracurricular opportunities
  - q. Career services/employment percentages
  - r. Total cost of education for one year
  - s. Tuition cost for one year
  - t. Financial Aid - scholarships, loans, assistantships, fellowships, work study
  - u. Application deadlines
  - v. Application fees
  - w. Application requirements (including what standardized test(s) are needed)
  - x. Must you do an interview?
  - y. Do they keep a waiting list of applicants?
  - z. Can you appeal/get feedback if denied?

**TIP:** Some of the columns in your research spreadsheet will have letter grades, some will say "yes," "no" or "maybe," some will be dates, dollar amounts or various numerical responses, and some will be more evaluative (scale of 1-5, with 1 being terrible and 5 being outstanding).

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### Ten months before applying:

1. Work on completing your research spreadsheet, filling in every column for each option. As you go along you will eliminate a few or quite a few. That is okay. As a consumer you are doing what you should be doing - comparison shopping.
2. After reviewing your entire spreadsheet, do a very general rank order of the options that remain. You could rank every option, starting with #1 and going to the end of the list. Or, you could group your options: top group, second group, third group, etc. Whenever possible, you should have at least five options left. Hopefully, you will have many more. However, depending on the type of graduate program you seek, the number of options will vary. My point is that you are still not at the place where you need to have a "short list." You are still ten months away from applying, and will have several opportunities to narrow down your list before that time.
3. Take a look at the general rank order you have done. Do you believe the ranking is based on what YOU really feel? Did you get enough information to complete your ranking?

**TIP:** Remember, you can and should feel free to change your research spreadsheet evaluations at any time. Perhaps further information and/or contact with one or more of your options will cause them to go up or down on your overall list. That is another great reason for taking plenty of time to do your research. You tend to learn more about an institution the longer you do research about it. First impressions, while important, may change later on based on repeated observation and communication.

For the complete 12-month checklist, seven personal questions to ask about grad school and much more, go to Dr. Martin's website and order his book *Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*. The website address is [www.gradschoolroadmap.com](http://www.gradschoolroadmap.com)

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