Graduate and Professional School Guide

The CSE Career Center can help you prepare for the graduate/professional school application process through the use of this guide, the Resource Center, and career counseling appointments. Pre-health students can obtain information and help preparing for health programs through the Health Careers Center, which offers courses, online workshops, and information sessions: healthcareers.umn.edu/.

GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS:
It is important to evaluate your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Is it required for your field, such as medicine, law, university teaching, or research? Don’t make the assumption that a graduate degree will lead to more job prospects or a higher salary. Your decision to pursue a graduate degree should not be based on the job market or the uncertainty of your next step. Make sure you have a specific outcome in mind, and do your research to determine if obtaining a graduate degree will help you reach your career goals.

Do Your Research and Make a Spreadsheet:
- First define your criteria: Location, institution type, degree type, structure of program, financial support, program ranking, etc.
- Next, do the research and consider creating a spreadsheet to keep your information organized. Start with gradschools.com and petersons.com to search by program type and location.
- After you have narrowed down your options, visit the individual websites of those institutions to gather specific information. Other helpful resources are faculty and alumni, as they often can give you specific information on programs. If possible, visit the institutions of interest and talk to faculty and current graduate students. If you cannot visit, make contacts and gather as much information as possible in order to make a confident decision.

Note Deadlines for Application Materials:
After you have decided on potential graduate programs, the next step is to request the application materials. The requirements and deadlines will vary; however, the deadlines are typically between December and March. Apply as early as possible for institutions with a rolling admission policy.

Graduate/Professional School Admission Exams:
The most common exam is the GRE; however, pay attention to the admission guidelines to ensure you take the right test. (For more information on types of exams, visit gradschooltips.com/. For information on the GRE, visit gre.org.) It is recommended that you create a study plan and allow adequate time to prepare for admission exams. Note deadlines of exams and register early, as registration fills up quickly. You may consider purchasing a test prep book, such as Kaplan or Princeton Review. Preparation materials and practice exams are available through SMART Learning Commons in 204 Walter Library, lib.umn.edu/smart

Personal Statement/Essay:
Most graduate and professional school programs will have specific criteria they would like you to include in the form of an essay. The essay should be clear and concise and it should showcase the depth of your thinking. The essay should be a reflection of who you are, why you have chosen the field, and why you are a good candidate. See Pg. 2 to help you get started.

Letters of Recommendation:
Most graduate programs will require two or three letters of recommendation for your application. It is essential that you choose professional references, including faculty, and that you choose individuals who know you well enough to compose a strong letter. Once you have identified those individuals, set up a time to talk with them about your goals. Bring a copy of your application materials. Be sure to note if the program requires the letters to be submitted directly or sent in with your application.

Financial Aid:
Financial aid for graduate school is primarily in the form of assistantships, fellowships, and student loans. Investigate your financial aid options at each institution. Note the deadlines for financial aid, as they may be earlier than the application deadline.

Completed Applications:
It is a good idea to make back up copies of your application materials. After you submit your application materials, follow up to make sure they have been received and your file is complete. It is your responsibility to make sure the admissions committee has your completed application.
PERSONAL STATEMENTS:
The admission process for graduate and professional school is more competitive today than ever before. Undergraduate grades and entrance-exam scores don’t tell the entire story. Graduate and professional schools are also looking for applicants who are interesting, articulate, and distinctive, with different points of view, ambitions, backgrounds, and career interests. So how do the decision makers look at students beyond the application? The answer: through essay questions on the application (commonly referred to as personal statements), as well as letters of recommendation and in-person interviews.

The personal statement portion of a school’s admissions application presents a great opportunity for you to market yourself to the school/program.

THE QUESTIONS:
Personal statement questions (or essay questions) can vary among schools. Some provide very little guidance on what to write, while others ask specific questions. Some schools require a specific word, character or page limit, while others do not. Some schools require one personal statement, while others may require several essay questions. Pay attention to the guidelines for each school/program you apply to.

WRITING YOUR ESSAYS:
- Assemble your applications and determine how many different essays you must write. If the program requests responses to specific questions, make sure you address each one. Always address why you are interested in that program/school and why you are a good fit.
- Consult friends and relatives for ideas; others may see us differently than we see ourselves. You may be overlooking some theme, angle, or aspect of your personality that might be obvious to others who know you well.
- Determine what makes you unique. What is your story? What experiences have most influenced your career decisions? What inspiring stories could you share about experiences in your life and the impact they had on you?
- Consider identifying a theme for your personal statement, and outline your approach to what content should be included that is relevant to your theme. For example, if your theme is “social change,” identify what experiences or stories in your life have proven your commitment to social change or have influenced your interest in social change.
- Get feedback from others before completing your final draft. Faculty, friends, relatives, and the CSE Career Center can all be good resources for obtaining feedback on your personal statement.
- Bring a draft to the Center for Writing for feedback: writing.umn.edu/.

TIPS FOR WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS:
- Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas or experiences.
- Be yourself rather than pretending to be the “ideal” applicant.
- Get creative and imaginative, particularly in your opening remarks.
- Address the particular school’s unique features that attract you and make you a good fit.
- Enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, flow, and style.
- Don’t just repeat what is on your resume, expand upon it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:
- The CSE Career Center Resource Center has resources to assist you with writing your personal statement, such as Perfect Personal Statements.
- More tips for writing personal statements: accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx

INTERVIEWING:
PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW PROCESS:
An interview is a conversation and exchange of information to help you and the school determine if you are a good fit for the program. It’s important to prepare for an interview to feel more confident and comfortable. Interviewing is a learned skill, and the more practice and preparation you do, the easier it becomes and the more competitive of a candidate you will be.

Below are some ways for you to gain knowledge and practice:
- **Resource Center:** Find more detailed interview preparation information in the books and binders found in the CSE Career Center Resource Center.
- **Interview Stream:** This online resource allows you (with the use of a webcam) to record yourself answering interview questions: umn.interviewstream.com
- **Schedule a practice interview with a counselor:** Practice answering interview questions and get feedback from a counselor. Call 612-624-4090 to schedule an appointment. Pre-health students: Watch the online workshop about pre-health interviews through the Health Careers Center: healthcareers.umn.edu/.
INTERVIEW ATTIRE:
- Dress professionally—a suit is appropriate if you have one, otherwise wear a button-up dress shirt and dress pants. Make sure your clothes are clean and wrinkle free. A tie is often appropriate for an interview. If you wear a skirt, make sure it is knee length or longer.
- Wear comfortable dress shoes with matching color dress socks.
- Keep your hairstyle simple and facial hair groomed.

PREPARE QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER/COMMITTEE:
At the end of your interview, it is likely that they will ask if you have any questions. This is your opportunity to ask anything that would be helpful as you assess your fit with the school and program. It is important to ask thoughtful questions that cannot be answered through basic research. Use the information you gain from researching the school and program to develop more in-depth questions. Below are examples of general questions that may be helpful to ask:
- Can you provide some examples of what alumni from this program are doing?
- What is the selection timeline? When will candidates be notified of their acceptance?
- I’ve read articles by Professor X. To what extent are students involved with this research?
- What do you view as the strengths of this program?
- Can you tell me more about your research area?

PREPARE TO ANSWER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Know Yourself:
- Values, interests, skills, strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments
- Research experience and interests
- Related experience to the program and success stories from your past
- Why you want an advanced degree in this field and what your short term and long term career goals are

Know the Institution:
- Research the institution, program, and coursework.
- Familiarize yourself with the faculty and their publications, as well as research/assistantship opportunities.
- Be ready to specifically articulate why an institution is a good fit for you.

Know the Field:
- Research current issues, trends, and challenges.
- Think about what you want to accomplish in the field.

Interview Preparation Tips:
- It’s impossible to prepare for every question they’ll ask; however, be prepared for questions directly related to the program objectives and the field. Before your interview write down several stories that demonstrate the skills important to the graduate program (often you can find this information by reading about the program on the program website). This will help you prepare well thought-out examples for whatever questions they may ask.
- Each institution has a different interview process. Ask the program representative at each school about details regarding the interview day(s).
- The interview is usually conducted by faculty members and/or current students.
- Review the How to Approach Commonly Asked Interviewing Questions section below, review the list of Practice Interview Questions on Pg. 4 and 5, and write down and practice out loud what your responses would be.

HOW TO APPROACH COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Behavioral Based Questions (“Tell me about a time,” “Give me an example”): These questions are asked based on the assumption that past behavior predicts future performance. Therefore, they will ask you questions about the skills they are seeking and want to hear specific examples from your past that demonstrate these skills. Examples may come from work experience, internships, academic experiences, extra-curricular activities or volunteer work. The STAR (describe the Situation...Task...Action...Result) technique described below is useful for structuring your answers to ensure you are telling a detailed story. Before your interview write down several stories that demonstrate the skills that are important to the program and the field using the STAR technique, then practice telling these stories.

- **Situation/Task:** Description of specific situation, project or task related to the skill sought
- **Action:** Description of specific steps you took
- **Result:** Outcome resulting from the action taken. Be specific. How did you know you were successful?
Tell me about yourself: This question is asked to learn more about you, specifically what your academic background is and what your experience is related to the program. In your response include:

- Your student status such as major, year in school, courses in progress, and interests related to academics, research, and career goals.
- Your related experience: Internships, student organizations, research, work experience, course projects, and leadership positions (assume they have not read your resume).
- Qualities and skills you have that make you a good fit for the program and institution (use the research you did on the program to inform your answer).

What are your strengths? Research the program and the field to learn what skills and qualities are important to be successful, then identify which of these are your personal strengths. When asked “What are your strengths,” name a few and give detailed examples of how you have demonstrated these strengths in the past. Remember, your examples provide proof.

What are your weaknesses? Be honest about what your weaknesses are. Tell them one of your weaknesses and then give an example of how you are working on that weakness. Be specific about the steps you’ve taken to manage this weakness.

Why did you choose your major? Answering this question gives you the opportunity to demonstrate why you are passionate about your field. Be specific about why you chose your major, what motivates you to be successful in your program of study, and what you have enjoyed most about your academic program (courses, projects, research, a certain specialization in your field). Explain to the interviewer how your major has helped prepare you for the graduate program.

What are your short term and long term career goals? Relate your goals to the program and why you want to pursue an advanced degree. It is ok to be somewhat vague about your long term career goals; however, indicate some possibilities for your future based on what you know about the field. Be sure to demonstrate that you have a commitment to your field and that you want to develop and grow as a professional.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us? Often this question is asked at the end of an interview. Your response should include any information you have not yet been able to share with the interviewer that would be important for them to know regarding your key qualifications and your interest in the program.

Why should we admit you? This gives you the opportunity to summarize why you are an excellent candidate for the program and what makes you stand out from other applicants. Most likely the interviewer is not going to remember everything you said from your interview, so when this question is asked, reiterate your qualifications (unique strengths, skills, and experiences relevant to the program). Leave the interviewer with a positive lasting impression.

PRACTICE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in this program?
- What prompted you to enter this field?
- Why did you choose your major?
- Why do you want to pursue an advanced degree?
- What motivates you?
- What strengths would you bring to this program? What would you consider your weakness?
- What experiences have prepared you for this program?
- What are current issues/trends/challenges in this field?
- What are your short term and long term career goals?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment. What are you most proud of?
- What makes you unique from other applicants?
- How would a friend or professor describe you?
- What do you think your greatest challenge would be if admitted to this program?
- What are your interests outside of school?
- What is your research experience and/or interests?
PRACTICE BEHAVIORAL BASED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- Tell me about a goal you set and achieved.
- Describe the most significant written document, report or presentation you have completed.
- Describe the project or situation which best demonstrates your analytical abilities. What was your role?
- Give a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you played a leadership role on a team project.
- Tell me about a time when you took initiative beyond what was expected.
- Tell me about a time when you were faced with multiple conflicting priorities. How did you organize your work?
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively as part of a team.
- Give me an example of something you’ve done that demonstrates your creativity.
- Tell me about a time when you communicated effectively.
- Give me an example of a time you used great attention to detail to complete a task. How did you handle that situation?
- Tell me about a stressful situation you were in and how you managed it.
- Give me an example of a time when you encountered an obstacle in a project and how you overcame the obstacle.

AT THE INTERVIEW:

- Map out the location of your interview and arrive 10-15 minutes early.
- Bring extra copies of your application materials and questions to ask the interviewer in a portfolio or folder.
- Give a firm handshake, introduce yourself, make eye contact, and smile.
- Be polite, honest, professional, and enthusiastic. Show that you are passionate about the field and are interested in that specific program.
- Every interviewer has a different style, follow their lead.
- Speak slowly, clearly, and concisely.
- Relax and breathe; it’s important to be yourself.
- At the end of the interview, after you’ve asked your questions, re-state your interest and qualifications and thank them for their time. Ask them what the next steps are in the process and what their selection timeline is. Ask for their business cards so you can send a thank you note and follow up.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW:

- Reflect on what you have done well and what you want to improve on.
- Within 48 hours of an interview, it is crucial to send the interviewer(s) a letter expressing your sincere appreciation as well as your interest in the position. You may express why you think you are a good match for the program. Include something specific that was discussed during the interview. Thank you letters can be handwritten on stationary, typed in a professional format, or sent via email. Keep in mind that if they indicate at your interview they are making a decision in the next few days, an email may be the best method for sending your letter to ensure they receive it before they make their decision.

Thank You Letter Example

Dear Dr. Dixon,

I want to thank you for taking the time to interview me for entrance to the Mechanical Engineering graduate program. I enjoyed our discussion about the outstanding research institutes and opportunities to get involved as a graduate student.

I think my past research experience and involvement with Engineers Without Borders has really prepared me for an advanced degree in the mechanical engineering field. I hope to continue to do research and contribute successfully to the field.

The interview reinforced my enthusiasm for the program and the possibility of attending XYZ University. Please let me know if you need any additional information from me. Thank you again, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ashley Johnson

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Watch the Preparing for Graduate/Professional School and Personal Statements Online Workshops on the CSE Career Center website: ccse.umn.edu/students/online-workshops/
- Visit the CSE Career Center Resource Center for directories of graduate programs and books to help you write your personal statements.
- Take a class. Graduate and Professional School: Success Strategies for Preparation, Admission, and Beyond (CFAN 3480), is a one-credit course that will help you explore your post-baccalaureate options and guide you through the application process.