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Graduate Preparation Guide 2008

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In today's super-competitive job market, a bachelor's degree is often not good enough for students to land high-paying jobs. More and more, students are electing to continue their education in order to open up more opportunities.

But getting a graduate degree isn't as simple as just signing up for classes. In order to get into distinguished graduate schools, students in all the disciplines have to make sure they're ready. That's why we've done the research and prepared for you a brief guide to help you understand what kind of things you need for grad school.

liberal arts

THE GRE

The first thing to do when preparing for graduate school is to register and study up for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). There are two different GRE tests a prospective graduate student may choose to take.

The first is the GRE General Test. This examination is administered year-round at computer-based test centers in the U.S. and Canada. Lasting roughly three hours, it measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills. The cost of the test is approximately \$140, with additional fees applied for other options such as changing a desired test center or rescheduling a test date.

The subject tests are only given three times a year in October, November and April and cost approximately \$130, with the same additional fees as the General Test. This subject-specific examination may be required by some graduate programs in addition to the General Test.

Now, to prepare for the dreaded test, a student has many options. A student preparing for either one of the two tests may spend as little as nothing all the way up to hundreds of dollars on preparation. There are many books, CDs, and online material available to any student looking for extra help.

When you will receive your score depends on the type of test that was taken. The computer version of the General GRE results in the quickest receipt of scores - approximately 10 to 15 days after the test was taken. However, the paper version of the general test as well as the subject test could be received anywhere from four to six weeks after the test date. All scores are sent to colleges and universities designated by the student the day of the test.

The biggest step when getting ready for graduate school is choosing a school that fits your needs. This is not always easy, as schools don't jump right out and tell you what they have to offer. This process calls for a lot of research, which can turn some people away.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Register early, test centers fill up quickly.
- Take the test as soon as possible so the college or university may receive the scores in time to review your application.
- Make sure the spelling of your name matches the name printed on the identification document presented to you at the testing center. Mismatched information will cause you to not be permitted to take the test and your fee will be forfeited.
- Late registration is available for an additional fee when registering online.
- You may take the exam more than once, so don't fright if the first time doesn't go so well.

WHERE ARE THE TESTING SITES?

Educational Testing Service is the organization that administers the GRE. You can reach it at www.ets.org for a complete list of testing sites. Here are the closest ones:

- Prometric in Ann Arbor
- ETS at Wayne State
- ETS at MSU
- Prometric in Grand Rapids
- Prometric in Lansing
- Prometric in Livonia
- ETS at CMU
- Prometric in Sault Ste. Marie
- Prometric in Troy

science and engineering

DECLARING A CONCENTRATION AND FINDING A SCHOOL

Like a liberal arts major, someone in the field of science or engineering would also have to take the GRE in order to apply to a school.

The next step is to find a school. This step is difficult, as programs tend to vary. Any SVSU student may declare themselves an electrical and computer engineering major or a mechanical engineering major, or major in any of natural sciences.

In Michigan, the most well-known school in the field of engineering is Michigan Technological University, located in Houghton. MTU offers numerous graduate programs in the field of engineering, including chemical, civil, biomedical, and environmental engineering.

Another school in Michigan that is known for its engineering program is the University of Michigan. U of M offers engineering degrees in aerospace, biomedical, chemical, automotive, pharmaceutical engineering, and as well as many others.

Both Michigan Tech and U of M's programs are competitive and require a lengthy preparation process.

ADVICE FROM A DEAN AT MICHIGAN TECH

Jacqueline Huntoon, a graduate school dean at Michigan Tech, finds the most important part of an application the letters of recommendation.

"The letters of recommendation are one of the most important parts of the application package because they help faculty members to see what their own colleagues think about the qualifications of students who are applying to graduate school," she said.

Huntoon said not all that apply will be accepted into the school, which can sometimes make applying a tough process to complete. She finds that doing well on the GRE can heighten the chances an applicant is accepted.

Another part of the application that needs to be strong for those applying to a graduate school focused on engineering is the quantitative part of the GRE. Graduate students in engineering need to have good math skills, and this is the easiest way for admissions to understand those abilities.

Huntoon said the single most important trait for an undergraduate to have in order to achieve success in graduate school is self-motivation.

"Students who are enthusiastic about learning and have the self-motivation to work hard to figure out how to solve problems get the most out of the graduate experience," she said. "They are also the most rewarding for our faculty to work with because by the time they complete their degree they are like junior colleagues in that they are truly experts in a specific area of research."

While an undergraduate student may do well on the GRE and have a complete application, it will be the student with experience that gains the edge over the rest of the applicants. Huntoon understands this, and says building rapport with faculty at an undergraduate institution will enable a student to find experience in the field.

"Students who have the opportunity to get work experience or research experience prior to graduate school are also at an advantage because they usually have a clear idea of the types of problems they want to work on," the dean said. "That helps them with the statement of purpose section of the application to graduate school."

pre-law majors

THE LSAT

Just as liberal arts and engineering majors need to take the GRE, political science students (or any student interested in going to law school) must take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). The test measures reading and verbal reasoning skills and is given four times a year at hundreds of locations around the world.

SVSU grad Andy Suszek found the length of the test the most difficult part. The LSAT calls for three straight hours of test taking. He said the best preparation for him came from using practice tests and not allowing himself to break. This taught him how to maintain focus for an extended length of time.

The registration fee for the LSAT is \$123, and those who register late have to pay an additional \$62. Suszek looked at it as more than just a fee.

"The cost was an issue," he said. "Law school is expensive, but it is an investment. I was able to draw a partial scholarship, though, which helps offset some of the costs."

FOCUSING YOUR UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

While on SVSU's campus, the then-political science major found SVSU helpful in his preparation for law school. He said this helpfulness came from the effort he put into finding the right resources and experiences. Focusing much of his attention on student organizations, Suszek developed communication, leadership, and teamwork skills.

Gaining these experiences was helpful, but the Alpena native also found that utilizing professors is a great way to gain insight as well.

"Dr. Lane is the pre-law adviser, and he helped quite a bit," he said. "The whole political science department is very good at helping students achieve what they want."

The remaining application process may take up a lot of time, but Suszek said having the proper mind set before going into law school is important. He finds that learning your interests and where you want to go is essential to finding the right path for your future.

"My advice would be make sure you want to do both the program and the career it leads you toward," he said. "For example, if you view Law School as a three year sacrifice, you will struggle. You should only go if you think you will be interested in learning."

Suszek now attends DePaul University in Chicago and looks back at his time as an undergraduate at SVSU a rewarding one. He said that students will only get as much as an experience out of SVSU as they work for.

"The value of SVSU, like anything else in the world, is equal to the effort each student puts into it."

Applying to any graduate school is like applying to college as a freshman, in that it's ultimately your choice to decide on which college or university fits your needs. Decide on a field of study and all that is left to do is research, research, research.

For Carly Toyzan, the process of applying to grad school was a lengthy but exciting one. Double majoring in professional and technical writing and communication, she knew as a sophomore at SVSU that she wanted to pursue a career in magazine editing. And this choice would mean she had to start looking at a graduate school.

For more of Carly's story see GRAD, page A2