



Graduate School Considerations

WHAT IS YOUR “WHY”?

Graduate school can be a significant time and financial commitment. It is important to consider **why** you would like to attend prior to starting the application process. Consider the following questions:

- Do I have a clear idea of my future career path?
- Does the future career/ position I would like to pursue require an advanced degree?
- Do I want to pursue a career in a different direction than my undergraduate degree, and does this degree align with that career path?
- Do I know the results of pursuing this particular degree (ex. salary, position opportunities, etc.)?
- Will this degree give me more in-depth or specific knowledge that would benefit my career?

Answering “no” more than “yes”? Schedule a meeting with the Office of Career Services or your faculty advisor to further discuss if graduate school is the right option for you.

WHEN SHOULD YOU ATTEND?

Some cadets attend graduate school immediately after VMI; other cadets take a gap year (or multiple!). It is important to consider **when** you will attend, since it not only impacts your life, but can impact your application.

Graduate School Immediately Following Undergrad

Advantages

- You are already in the habit of being a student, so the routine is familiar to you.
- Some career paths require advanced degrees for entry-level opportunities.
- You may have less responsibilities outside of school (family, mortgage, work, etc.).
- [Graduate school partnerships](#) with specific institutions can provide a streamlined application process.

Disadvantages

- With limited experience in the field, you may have a harder time relating your studies to your future career path.
- You may be burned out without a break between undergraduate and graduate school.
- You may have to put certain life decisions on hold (retirement/ investments, home buying, etc.).

Taking a Gap Year

Advantages

- Some graduate programs (ex. certain law schools) prefer applicants that have graduated prior to applying to grad school; additional experience can make you a more competitive candidate.
- You can save money to pay for school/ other expenses, or you can find an employer that offers educational benefits.
- Some students feel burnout after 4 years of undergraduate education, and this time can be used as a break before starting up their studies again.
- You can gain relevant experience and clarify career goals.
- You can enroll in courses that may improve your application/ GPA.

Disadvantages

- It may be difficult to get back into an academic routine.
- You may have additional responsibilities (family, mortgage, etc.) that may limit your time and flexibility.

GRADUATE SCHOOL REVIEW

When reviewing different graduate programs, consider:

- **Graduate School Partnerships:** VMI holds several agreements with graduate and professional schools in a number of academic disciplines; view more information on our [website](#).
- **Programs/ Degrees Offered:** Does the institution offer the degree that you are interested in (ex. you may be interested in an EdD, and the school only offers a PhD)?
- **Accreditation:** For the institution, there are two types of accreditation: national and regional (regional accreditation is preferable, as they typically have more rigorous standards). Also consider program-specific accreditation (ex. if you are attending law school, and your program is **not** ABA accredited, you may not be eligible to sit for the bar exam).
- **Admission Standards:** Schools will vary in how competitive their applicant pool is for a particular program. Review to make sure you are fulfilling the minimum admission standards (like a minimum GPA requirement).
- **Rank:** One way to evaluate the rigor and prestige of a program is their ranking in publications like US News and World Report. However, the methodology of how programs are ranked is frequently questioned, and some prestigious programs have decided to no longer participate.
- **Research/ Specialization Focus:** Some programs may specialize in a certain area (ex. some medical schools are known for their research programs, whereas others are known for their medical training). The more niche your interests, the more research you will want to complete to see what programs will best support you.
- **Online vs. In-person vs. Hybrid:** Some students prefer in-person learning, while others need the flexibility that online offers. Be sure to consider your individual situation, degree, and learning goals.
- **Size:** Consider the size of both the program and the school. If you prefer more one-on-one interaction with your instructor to succeed, prioritize smaller programs.
- **Location:** Remember that you will be attending graduate school for a length of time, therefore, location should be a factor. If you would prefer to live in a certain area post-graduation (ex. the west coast), make sure you are evaluating institutions in that area as it will make the transition easier. Furthermore, consider cost of living; living expenses in certain areas (ex. northern Virginia) may impact your budget. Some cadets also focus on schools near family/ friends who are open to providing housing for limited or no additional costs to limit expenses. State residency may impact tuition costs for certain public institutions as well.
- **Culture:** Do your views align with the mission of the school/ program? What type of environment do you prefer to learn in? Some students excel in a competitive environment, whereas others prefer a tightknit community. Visiting the school and speaking with recent graduates can give you an idea of your fit with that particular institution.
- **Faculty:** Are the faculty well-respected in their field? If you are interested in research, are there faculty conducting research in your area of interest? What are their professional experiences/ publications? These individuals will serve as your teachers and mentors and can be vital to your success. Attending information sessions may give you the opportunity to meet with faculty; your current faculty may also be able to make recommendations based on their network.
- **Costs and Financial Aid:** Consider the costs of the program (tuition, fees, books, etc.) minus any potential financial aid (scholarships, grants, fellowships, etc.).
- **Career Support:** Does the institution/ program have a career services office or other support that can assist you with your job search? It is also beneficial to research the employers and salaries of recent graduates to get an idea of employment outcomes.
- **Facilities:** Visiting the institution (or completing a virtual tour) will give you the opportunity to review the condition of the buildings. Also, if there are any particular facilities/ equipment that you are interested in, research that now.
- **Licensing Rates:** If your degree requires licensing/ examination (ex. passing the bar for law school), make sure to research what percentage of students pass the examination at each institution.
- **Standardized Test Scores:** some programs may require certain standardized tests while others do not (ex. the GRE). For programs that heavily rely on test scores (ex. medical or law school), researching the average acceptance score is helpful in understanding their competitiveness.

GRADUATE SCHOOL TIMELINE

Here you can find a basic timeline of when to work on graduate application materials, based on a post-graduation summer or fall start date. As application deadlines differ, make sure to adjust to your own personal situation.

3rd Class Year

- Explore career options to determine if graduate school is the best option and what programs align with your future career goals.
- Start researching potential programs (ex. graduate school fairs, open houses, websites, meeting with your academic/pre-professional advisor, connecting with alumni, etc.).
 - Note: if a program has particular class requirements (ex. you're applying to a Physical Therapy program that requires Anatomy & Physiology), make sure you are fulfilling those requirements whether at VMI or through another institution.
- Ask what experiences will best prepare you for graduate school and your future career (ex. internships, shadowing, civic engagement opportunities, etc.).
- Consider whether you would like to attend graduate school immediately after graduation or take a gap year (or two!).
- Begin speaking with Career Services/ Faculty/ [Pre-Professional Advisors](#) about graduate school options, different ways to strengthen your application, and how to prepare.
- Build positive relationships with individuals that can mentor you regarding graduate school and your future career, as well as possibly write you a letter of recommendation in the future.

2nd Class Year

- Finalize your list of programs and save any documentation regarding application components (ex. deadlines, class requirements, entrance exams, etc.).
 - Note: the number of programs you apply to depends on many factors. For many applicants, around 5 programs are a good starting point as this allows for a mix of target, reach, and safety schools. The more competitive the degree type (ex. MD), the more programs you may want to apply to.
- Review costs and financial assistance options (ex. loans, grants/ scholarships, assistantships, etc.); keep track of deadlines.
- Start preparing for entrance exams, if required (VMI offers courses through the [Princeton Review](#)).
- Before summer furlough, reach out to chosen individuals to ask if they will write a letter of recommendation for graduate school in the fall (September/ October are very busy for faculty, so requesting before the semester starts gives them some additional time to prepare). Most programs request around 3 letters of recommendation.
- Consider taking any entrance exams prior to your first-class year in case you decide to take the test again to improve your score.
- Create a list of schools you would like to visit; some host information sessions for prospective students (virtually and/ or in-person).

1st Class Year

- Register for entrance exams if required and not completed in your second-class year.
- Reach out to the individuals that are writing your letters of recommendation to provide them with the necessary resources and any updated information.
 - Provide the individuals writing your letters of recommendation with a list of schools you are applying to, your updated resume, and any other items that may assist with writing the letter (ex. your personal statement).
 - Be sure to also write a thank you note and keep them up-to-date on your plans!
- Draft your application essays/ personal statements and have them reviewed (by pre-professional advisors, academic advisors, the [Writing Center](#), etc.).
- Have your [resume](#) reviewed by the Office of Career Services.
- Request transcripts from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).

- Prepare for interviews, if required (and remember to send a thank you note/ email after each interview!).
- Complete any necessary application components and submit! Be sure to keep track of what programs you have submitted applications to and when (screenshots, emails, etc.) in case there are any issues.
- Submit any financial aid forms/ documents.
- Review your acceptances and decide which program is the best fit for you; contact any programs you are declining.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Here is an overview of some possible program requirements:

- **GPA**
 - Some programs may have a minimum GPA for admission (frequently, around a 3.0 cumulative GPA) or a recommended GPA (this GPA is in-line with the average for accepted students). Programs may also review your GPA in different ways, like prerequisite GPA (GPA calculated with the prerequisite courses), science GPA (using just science courses), or last 60 GPA (GPA calculated using your last 60 credit hours).
 - Remember: to admissions professionals, your GPA demonstrates your likelihood of success in completing a graduate program. This is why it is such a vital part of the application process.
- **Degree Completion/ Specific Major**
 - Depending on the timing of the program, programs will require that your bachelor's degree be completed before the start date. Programs may also require a certain major for acceptance.
- **Prerequisite Courses**
 - Programs may have specific courses that have to be completed before admission; typically, these courses must meet a minimum grade (often a C).
- **Graduate Admission Tests**
 - Tests are typically valid for 2-5 years, so consider timelines when scheduling your test, especially if you are taking a gap year.
- **Personal Statement**
 - This is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from other candidates, as well as highlight experiences/ skills/ values that may not be evident elsewhere on your application.
 - Make sure you are fulfilling any requirements set in the application (ex. page limit, formatting, topic, etc.).
 - Each statement should be geared towards that particular program unless there is a standardized platform (ex. CASPA or PTCAS) to apply to multiple programs at once with a general personal statement.
 - Everyone has a different opinion on what should be included in a general personal statement, so there isn't one perfect way to write one. A few tips to help you get started:
 - If you had five minutes to convince the admissions committee you are the right fit, what would you talk about? Use this to start the brainstorming process. Focus on how you can connect your life experiences to your professional goals and graduate school interests.
 - Why are you interested in this particular field? What makes you the perfect fit for this program? What experiences have prepared you for graduate school and/ or inspired your future goals? What do you understand about the field? What is your biggest accomplishment? How have you overcome hardships? What are your future goals?
 - Based on your brainstorming, create a rough draft. Don't worry too much about editing or page length; this is just to get your thoughts on paper.
 - Review and revise:
 - Notice what are the strongest components in the essay as you adjust the length.
 - Cut any parts that are exaggerated, confidential, or potentially controversial (unless the program is directly related to this topic).
 - Review for errors (ex. spelling, grammar, etc.).

- Make sure no portions have a negative tone. Even if you want to include frustrations or discuss components of your application that may deter your acceptance (ex. a semester of below average grades), focus on the positive and how you have grown from that experience.
 - If there is a prompt, review to ensure that the statement is on-topic.
 - Have a trusted individual (or multiple!) review the essay before submitting. This can include faculty, the Writing Center, Career Services, etc.
- **Resume/ CV**
 - Schedule an appointment with the Office of Career Services to discuss and review your resume/ CV.
 - The document should include experiences relevant to your future career field (ex. clinical experience for medical school), but also other experiences to show that you are a well-rounded applicant.
 - Types of items that may be included: research, clinical experience, shadowing, volunteering, internships, work experience, study abroad, athletics, leadership experiences, VMI activities/ organizations, publications, presentations, awards, skills (computer, language), etc.
- **Writing Samples**
 - Programs may require a writing sample; typically, applicants use a previously written essay (submitted for a class, scholarships, etc.).
 - Typically, a topic relevant to your future career is preferred.
 - Meet with the Writing Center/ faculty to review which essay is the best option to submit.
- **Shadowing/ Healthcare Hours**
 - Shadowing a practitioner is not only required by many healthcare/ medical programs, but it is also an excellent opportunity to see if the career path is the right fit for you. Use this as an opportunity to build your professional network with individuals in your future career field.
 - If a program requires shadowing or healthcare hours, review application instructions to see how these hours need to be submitted and verified.
- **Letters of Recommendation**
 - Choose individuals that you have a strong relationship with, can articulate how you will excel in graduate school/ your future career, and can vouch for your character. These individuals may include faculty as well as coaches, supervisors, etc. Some programs will request specific roles for these letters (ex. two of three LORs need to be from faculty).
 - Avoid asking someone just because they have a prestigious title. If you have not built a relationship with them, it will be difficult for them to write you an adequate LOR. It is better to have a strong letter from someone who knows you well. If any individual you ask seems reluctant, ask someone else.
 - Provide your recommender with any necessary resources (ex. the link to submit the letter) as well as any documents that may assist them in completing the letter (ex. your resume, personal statement, unofficial transcript, notes of anything you would like emphasized, list of programs and their application deadlines, etc.).
 - Send a thank you note to anyone that provides a letter of recommendation and keep them updated on how the application process is going.
- **Interviews**
 - If the program requires interviews, an invitation to interview means that the admissions staff considers you a possible candidate for their program. Congratulations!
 - Schedule a meeting with the Office of Career Services and/ or your Pre-Professional Advisor to prepare for your interview and possibly conduct a mock interview.
 - Although many cadets get nervous about the interview process, remember that all the admissions committee is looking to do is confirm what your application has already told them: you are a valuable candidate for their program.
 - If the interview is in-person, finalize transportation and permits as soon as you can to prevent setbacks.
 - Prep for questions beforehand. For example:
 - Why are you interested in this school/ program? Why do you want to enter this field?
 - Questions pertaining to your application (ex. grades, personal statement, research, internships, etc.).

- Situational interview questions (ex. “A professor reported a student to the Dean for cheating. The student claims that they did not cheat but merely forgot to cite a portion of their essay. The Dean decides, based on the honor code, to dismiss the student from the university. Do you agree with the Dean’s decision? Why or why not?”).
- Opinions on current events/topics in the field (ex. new research in the medical field, or current events in politics).
- Types of Interviews:
 - One-on-one: meet individually with a faculty member, student, alumnus, or member of the admissions team.
 - Panel: interviewed by multiple people at once.
 - MMI (Multiple Mini Interviews): multiple (6-10) stations where each station there is a question or scenario posed to the applicant and responses are timed and scored; more common in the healthcare field.
 - Group Interviews: where you are interviewed with multiple other applicants, by either one individual or a panel.
- If you will not be wearing your uniform for the interview, reach out to Career Services for proper interview attire. In general, go formal: well-fitting suits in conservative colors (navy, black, or dark grey); a pressed button-up shirt or blouse in a neutral color (typically white); and closed-toe dress shoes.
- Interview Day Basics:
 - Bring:
 - An umbrella and/ or a professional coat, if needed.
 - Copies of your application materials (essay, etc.).
 - A legal pad and pen in a professional portfolio for notes.
 - A list of questions (targeted to that specific school/ program).
 - Arrive early and save any contact information (in case an emergency prevents you from arriving on time).
 - Turn your cell phone off before entering the building.
 - Be polite to everyone you meet. Introduce yourself, maintain eye contact, and shake hands firmly.
 - Say thank you and immediately send out thank you emails/ notes after your interview.
 - Review your notes to evaluate how you feel about the program and how you can improve for your next interview.